5-1-1982

"Over the Horizon of the Years": Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Little House Books

Janet Spaeth

"OVER THE HORIZON OF THE YEARS": LAURA INGALLS WILDER AND THE LITTLE HOUSE BOOKS

by
Janet Spaeth

Bachelor of Arts, University of New Mexico, 1973

Master of Library Science, University of Oregon, 1978

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May
1982

This Dissertation submitted by Janet Spaeth in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done.

Norton R. Kingshorn
(Chairman)

Neil V. Price

Sandra Donaldson

Robert W. King

Susan J. Schmidt

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Department English

Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Signature Janet Spaeth

Date April 27, 1982

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DEDICATION

Laura, we all have our Roses, those who cajole, console, and commiserate. I would like to thank my Roses: first, my committee--Norton Kinghorn, Bob King, Sandy Donaldson, Sheldon Schmidt, and Neil Price; second, Ursula Hovet, who was enthusiastic about the thankless job of typing this; and third, but by no means last, my husband Kevin, who listened patiently and never once left the room while I was talking about you.

But most of all, I want to thank you, Laura. You were right--it <u>is</u> better farther on. So, over the horizon of the years, my appreciation and love extends to you. Thank you, Laura. Thank you very much.

ABSTRACT

"'Over the Horizon of the Years': Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Little House Books" consists of five essays, each of which focuses on an aspect of Wilder's writing which has been overlooked in critical analyses of her writing. The title is taken from the ending of The First Four Years: "'it is better farther on' . . . over the horizon of the years ahead." "Horizon" is a key word in a study of the Little House series, for Wilder had to examine the horizon behind her to write the books, which are autobiographical fiction, while projecting the optimism contained in the horizon ahead.

The first essay, "Family Folklore in Little House in the Big Woods," explores family traditions in folklore and their relationship to the general structure of Little House in the Big Woods, which Wilder wrote to preserve the stories her father told her when she was a child.

The second essay, "'It Is Better Farther On': The Westward Movement and the Little House Books," considers the Little House series as a unified account of the effects of the Homestead Act of 1862 on both the pioneer and the frontier: the lure of the West, the struggle to comply with the terms of the Homestead Act, and the building of

a frontier society.

The third essay, "'I Have Always Lived in Little Houses': Wilder's Portraits of Frontier Women," discusses female social training on the American frontier as revealed in the Little House series. Most of the characters in the series are female and thus provide a valuable view of the women who settled in the West and their interpretations of their environment.

The fourth essay, "Expression of Growth in the Little House Books: Language and Experience," examines Wilder's language--the dichotomous ordering of Laura's environment, the changing image of the stars, and Laura's perception of language--to discover how she portrays Laura's growth to adulthood.

The fifth essay, "The Technique of the Little House Books," identifies particulars of Wilder's technique (point of view, plot, theme, tone, imagery, personification, and character) and analyzes their contributions to the enduring success of the series.

INTRODUCTION

The first time I read Little House in the Big Woods, I was struck by the irrefutable logic of the closing, so simple, so obvious, that I was stunned I had not acknowledged it before: ". . . Now is now. It can never be a long time ago" (LHBW, p. 238).[1] The satisfaction that those words gave me sprang from the realization that I was reading something which was undeniably true, absolutely correct. There is something very reassuring about indisputable truth, especially when that truth embodies a faith in the proper continuity of the world.

My reaction to the closing of The First Four Years was quite different. Rather than being surprised by simple logic, I realized that I was being taught a lesson gained only through experience. The message was the same, but the voice was more mature. Here was not the plain and simple reasoning of a child: here was the knowledgeable voice of experience, as smooth as a work-worn hand and as comforting. There was no place which would be better than where one was at the moment, and to hunt endlessly for it was to delude oneself.

But the promise is made that life will get better. And it is precisely this promise that makes "now" wonderful. It is better than yesterday, and tomorrow will be even better. Laura Ingalls Wilder ties the optimism of her vision to the philosophy of the pioneer:

> "It is better farther on"--only instead of farther on in space, it was farther on in time, over the horizon of the years ahead instead of the far horizon of the west. (FFY, p. 134)

"Horizon" is the key word in an examination of the Little House series, for just as there is a horizon ahead, there is a horizon behind. To write the Little House books, which are autobiographical fiction, Wilder had to look at the horizon behind her. Wilder herself discovered that over the horizon of the years behind lay happy and satisfying memories:

> I have learned in this work [Little House in the Big Woods] that when I went as far back in my memory as I could and left my mind there awhile it would go farther back and still farther, bringing out of the dimness of the past things that were beyond my ordinary remembrance. Also, to my surprise, I have discovered that I have led a very interesting life. (Zochert, p. 21)

The satisfaction that the Little House series affords its readers lies in the books' being planted precisely in the fictive moment, exactly between the two horizons in the here-and-now, which is, as Laura reminds us, the best place to be. Little House in the Big Woods, her memorial to her father, begins the reaching back to the far horizon which, in turn, reaches forward to the horizon ahead, into the minds and hearts of the children who read the story of Ma and Pa and Mary and Laura and Carrie and Grace and who have never seen a covered wagon but understand childhood and families.

"'Over the Horizon of the Years': Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Little House Books" focuses on five major areas of study. Each essay discusses an aspect of Wilder's writing that has been overlooked in critical analyses of her writing.

Wilder's intention in writing the first book of the series, Little House in the Big Woods, was to preserve the stories her father told her when she was a child. The first essay, "Family Folklore in Little House in the Big Woods," discusses the family story in folkloric tradition and its relationship to the general structure of Little House in the Big Woods.

The second essay, "'It Is Better Farther On': The Westward Movement and the Little House Books," considers the Little House books as a unified account of the effects

of the Homestead Act of 1862 on both the pioneer and the frontier: the lure of the West, the struggle to comply with the terms of the Homestead Act, and the building of a frontier society. Although both Wilder and her daughter Rose Wilder Lane claimed that the books were not to be taken as autobiography, but as autobiographical fiction, the series is an accurate account of the best days and the last days of the American frontier.

The third essay, "'I Have Always Lived in Little Houses': Wilder's Portraits of Frontier Women," discusses female social tradition and training on the American frontier as revealed in the books. The conflict between the settled and the unsettled is reflected in women whose opinions and standards were as diverse as their backgrounds. The Little House books are compared to other contemporary journals and retrospective works.

The fourth essay, "Expression of Growth in the Little House Books: Language and Experience," is a close examination of Wilder's language, which reflects the duality of Laura's frontier environment--security is measured in terms of inner/outer, safe/unsafe, home/wilderness, and other paired terms. The associations initially matched with such terms shift in the course of the series, reflecting Laura's growing awareness of herself in relation to her surroundings. Wilder also shows Laura's growth through the changing image of the stars and the way she sees language.

The fifth essay, "The Technique of the Little House Books," discusses Wilder's technique, examining point of view, theme, plot, tone, imagery, personification, and character. Elements of style which are peculiar to Wilder are identified, and their purpose is analyzed.

Throughout each of the essays, the concept of "horizon" is considered. It is important to bear in mind that wherever one stands, he or she stands in the center of the world, that the horizon marks merely a place one has been--or a place one will go. The Little House books tell us where Laura Ingalls Wilder had been and where we have been, but they cannot tell us where we will go. Wilder, however, does assure us that wherever it is, it is not the place that is important, but the fact that we have existed and will continue to exist. And that is the message to be discovered "over the horizon of the years ahead."

FAMILY FOLKLORE IN

LITTLE HOUSE IN THE BIG WOODS

The term "folklore" is commonly interpreted to mean a tale or action of a given cultural group; however, this definition is misleading. Ethnologists disagree about what constitutes the "lore" of folklore, but it is the term "folk" which prevents most folklore from being identified as such. Alan Dundes, in The Study of Folklore, offers what is probably the best definition of "folk":

> The term "folk" can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is--it could be a common occupation, language, or religion--but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. . . . Probably the smallest group would be an individual family. . . . (Dundes, p. 2)

The sorts of traditions within a family may range from basic folk beliefs, such as curatives or remedies, to family customs, such as nicknames, game playing, or joking, to more

structured and intricate systems, such as stories or tales. Storytelling itself becomes a disciplined, almost regulated form of folklore. Certain customs governing storytelling are created within the family, and, although they may be unspoken rules, are followed rigorously. Storytelling becomes a ritual.

When Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote Little House in the Big Woods, her stated intention was the transmittal and preservation of family tales:

> For years I had thought that the stories my father told me should be passed on to other children. I felt they were much too good to be lost. And so I wrote the Little House in the Big Woods. (Zochert, p. 211)

The inclusion of family traditions in Little House in the Big Woods establishes the atmosphere of "family" and supplies a vivid image of the sociological functioning of the family members in a frontier household.

By placing the tales in an autobiographical environment, Wilder preserved not only the stories themselves but the necessary setting and atmosphere of the storytelling. The importance of such surroundings to folklore is emphasized by Bronislaw Malinowski:

> The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it [the tale] remains life-

> less. . . . The interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience mean as much . . . as the text. . . . The performance, again, has to be placed in its proper time setting--the hour of the day, and the season. . . . All of these elements are equally relevant; all must be studied as well as the text. The stories live in real life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality. (Malinowski, p. 24)

The events of Little House in the Big Woods span a year, from late fall to early fall, and, consistent with traditional storytelling patterns in American and European communities, Pa tells stories only in winter and only at night.

The custom of storytelling as a wintertime activity is, as one might suspect, commonly found in northern climates, where winter means shorter days and longer nights, and the cold and the early dark prohibit outdoor evening play. Storytelling fills the gap between dusk and bed-

time, acting as a possible deterrent to the very real danger of "cabin fever."

The habit in the Ingalls home of telling stories in winter only is documented within the text:

> It was a warm night. The fire had gone to coals on the hearth, and Pa did not build it up. All around the little house, in the Big Woods, there were little sounds of falling snow, and from the eaves there was the drip, drip of the melting icicles.
>
> In just a little while the trees would be putting out their baby leaves, all rosy and yellow and pale green, and there would be wild flowers and birds in the woods.
>
> Then there would be no more stories by the fire at night, but all day long Laura and Mary would run and play among the trees, for it would be spring. (LHBW, p. 116)

The four tales Pa tells, set off formally from the text by individual titles, are winter-told stories and therefore appear only in the first half of the book.

The first of Pa's stories, "The Story of Grandpa and the Panther," introduces the storytelling tradition in the Ingalls home. The Ingallses, like other self-sufficient groupings, follow a daily regimen of ordered work and play.

Storytelling is a nighttime activity, occurring after the chores are done and the dinner eaten, and only Pa is recognized as storyteller.[2] His use of family members in the tales is effective because it brings the stories into a sharper focus for the Ingalls children: "Laura . . . wriggled closer against Pa's arm. She knew her Grandpa. He lived far away in the Big Woods" (LHBW, p. 40). Ruth Sawyer, in The Way of the Storyteller, notes that a three-year-old child has an intense concentration upon him- or herself, and expects, even demands, that the story will somehow include him or her (Sawyer, pp. 46-50). Pa's inclusion of Laura, especially, and Mary, by identifying the characters as relatives they know (Pa or Grandpa), satisfies the desires of the three-year-old Laura.[3]

The inspiration for Pa's first story is Black Susan, the cat who is quietly "blinking at the flames in the fireplace" (LHBW, p. 38). Black Susan symbolizes the mood of peacefulness in the home. But the cat in Pa's story, however genetically related to Black Susan, is not an emblem of familial orderliness: the panther is a symbol of the wildness of the outdoors. Pa takes an "inner" symbol and makes it an "outer" symbol, creating an opposition of inner/outer, safe/dangerous, home/wilderness, a dichotomous ordering which appears as a major theme consistently throughout the book. Black Susan is positive and mild: the panther is negative and violent.

The culmination of the tale, in which Grandpa barely escapes a panther by running into the safety of his own house, is one which emphasizes the "order out of chaos" view of the wilderness dweller, the culture creator, for without the sanctuary Grandpa's home offered, Laura's grandfather would have been killed by the panther. The outer world, the woods, is filled with violence and potential harm and must be restrained if the inner world, the home, is to be maintained. The inner/outer dichotomy is expanded to include the concepts of controlled/uncontrolled through the introduction of the gun: "Grandpa said he would never again go into the Big Woods without his gun" (LHBW, p. 43), and the role of the human being as tamer (i.e., controller) is illustrated by Black Susan's "stretching herself before the fire and running her claws in and out" (LHBW, p. 39), for a house cat is a tamed cousin of the panther. The difference between the two cats is marked by their uses of their claws: for Black Susan, extension of the claws signifies satisfaction; for the panther, it signifies danger.

The second of the stories, "The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods," further identifies the storytelling ritual in the Ingalls home and is prefaced by an informational passage about making bullets: "Every evening before he began to tell stories, Pa made the bullets for his next day's hunting" (LHBW, p. 45). The bullet-making passage not only introduces the topic of the story, but at

the same time, provides a link with the preceding tale by referring to the panther: "When he shot at a bear or a panther, he must kill it with the first shot. A wounded bear or a panther could kill a man before he had time to load his gun again" (LHBW, p. 52).

"The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods" is a teaching tale, for Pa had been told by his father "never to play by the way, but to hurry and bring the cows home before dark, because there were bears and wolves and panthers in the woods" (LHBW, p. 53). His ignoring of that advice led to the central problem of the tale, in which Pa, as a child, was scared by a voice in the nighttime woods. The story acts as a way of teaching Laura and Mary that they must listen to their parents, particularly their father, for parents know from experience what is dangerous.

The story also contains some patterning devices in which the audience becomes an active participant in the story-telling process. At one point in the story, Wilder stops Pa's narrative: "Pa always stopped telling the story here, and waited until Laura said, 'Go on, Pa! Go on!'" (LHBW, pp. 57-58). Wilder's use of the word "always" shows that this tale is not a new one to Laura and that Laura plays an active role in the telling. Her use of the modal "would" to indicate habitual action further illustrates Laura's involvement with the storytelling tradition: "'Yes, yes, Pa!' Laura would say, bouncing up and down on Pa's knee.

'And then what did he say?'" (LHBW, p. 58).

The "punch line" of the story reiterates the educational aspect of the story, for in it, the parental wisdom and knowledge is emphasized by the contrast with the child's ignorance: "He [Grandpa] said, 'If you'd obeyed me, as you should, you wouldn't have been out in the Big Woods after dark, and you wouldn't have been scared by a screech-owl!'" (LHBW, p. 59).

The third story, "The Story of Grandpa's Sled and the Pig," results from Laura's tantrum on a day when she is forced by custom to remain inactive: "I hate Sunday!" (LHBW, p. 56) she irreverently shouts. Pa tells her a story about the time her grandfather broke the Sunday rest rule and got into trouble with his father. The tale is designed to show Laura that her present strictures are not nearly as bad as they were for her grandfather, and that, in fact, they would have been even harder for her to accept had she been a little girl during her grandfather's childhood. It is an overt teaching tale: "'So you see, Laura and Mary,' Pa said, 'you may find it hard to be good, but you should be glad that it isn't as hard to be good now as it was when Grandpa was a boy'" (LHBW, p. 96). Laura does not ask, and her father does not volunteer an opinion, whether it is "good" or the perception of "good" which has changed in two generations: the validity of the custom of Sunday rest is not challenged.

The last of the tales Pa tells is introduced with more complexity than the others, and reflects some deep social patterning. "The Story of Pa and the Bear in the Way" occurs the morning after the exciting nighttime adventure of Ma and Laura, when Pa was in town and Ma and Laura went to milk Sukey, the cow. Ma saw a dark shape at the barnyard gate, and, thinking it was Sukey, slapped her to make her move. The light from the lantern Laura held then revealed that Ma had slapped not Sukey, but a bear.

The following morning, Pa tells Laura and Mary that he has a "new story" to tell them, "The Story of Pa and the Bear in the Way." The night before, when he was walking home from town, he saw a bear in the woods. It would not move, no matter how he shouted and waved at it. He had to pass it, so he took up a big stick, charged it, and clubbed it on the head. It still did not move: he had clubbed not a bear, but an old burned tree stump.

His story, the events of which occur at the same time as Ma's adventure, and with the same "participant," the bear, is the reverse of hers. When Laura asks Pa, "You'd have hit him on the head with a club, if he had been a bear, wouldn't you, Pa?" he answers, "Yes, I would. You see, I had to" (LHBW, p. 115). Not only have Pa's territorial homestead rights been abridged by the infringement of the wild upon his home, but his image at home has been up-

staged by Ma's experience. He uses the story as an assertion of his paternal place as environmental protector, guardian of the home.

Pa's stories, not only those that are formalized in the text, but those, too, in which he explains why his daily hunt was successful or unsuccessful, often insist upon his prowess in the hunt and in providing and are not dissimilar in theme to more traditional (and older) tales. Such tales are found world-wide in hunting cultures. The following tribal texts contain the same motif and first person emphasis as Pa's hunting stories:

> I, Keokuk, have slain a bear.
> Ayi--ayi--ayi--
> A great bear, a fierce bear,
> Ayi--ayi--ayi--
> With might have I slain him,
> Ayi--ayi--ayi--
> Great are the muscles of my arm--
> Strong for spear throwing--
> Strong for bear slaying--
> Strong for kayak going--
> I, Keokuk, have slain a bear.
> Ayi--ayi--ayi--
> (Innuit chant, Greenland; Sawyer, p. 46)

and

Hunting it was good,
Hunting it was good,

We have killed a beast,
We have killed a beast.

Now we have something to eat,
Now we have something to eat. . . .
(P. Ehrenreich, "The Botocudos, a Tapuya Tribe of Southern Brazil," Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, 1887; Sawyer, p. 47)

This sort of traditional boasting is a re-assertion to the community of the hunter's ability to provide, when the dangerous setting is removed from the audience. Only by such vocalization can the hunter re-create the environment of the hunt and impress both the audience and himself with the valor and usefulness of his activity.

Storytelling does not end in Little House in the Big Woods with the last titled tale, but formal storytelling is over with the end of winter. The story of Charley and the bees is told in late summer, during harvest, and is told in the wagon, soon after the events have occurred. It operates outside the traditions of the formal storytelling ritual because it is a tale which gains value by its immediacy.

The story is introduced in the preceding chapter with Pa's bringing home honey. When Laura asks him, "Didn't the bees sting you?" he replies, "No. Bees never sting me" (LHBW, p. 197). They do, of course, sting young Charley and quite badly, but Charley is not an adult male responsible for a home and a family. In Laura's eyes, Pa is immune because he is a father.

The story of Charley and the bees is a reworking of "the boy who cried wolf" tale, except instead of a wolf, Charley is confronted by bees. But this aspect of it goes over Laura's head: she sees only Charley's naughtiness in disobeying his father and slowing down the men's work.

Charley, who was supposed to be helping the men with the harvest, would instead stand at the far end of the field and jump up and down and shout to attract the workers' attention. The men would drop their work and run to him, fearing that he had been hurt. But each time Charley would laugh at them for falling for his joke. The men, finally disgusted with Charley's antics, ignore him the fourth time he does it, but when he doesn't stop, they realize something is wrong: Charley had been jumping on a yellow jackets' nest.

Pa says of the incident, "It served the little liar right," but when Laura lies awake that night, she wonders why Pa said that:

> She thought about what the yellow jackets had done to Charley. She thought it served Charley

> right, too. It served him right because he had been so monstrously naughty. And the bees had a right to sting him, when he jumped on their home.
>
> But she didn't understand why Pa had called him a little liar. She didn't understand how Charley could be a liar, when he had not said a word. (LHBW, p. 211)

Any relationship between Charley and the bees and another boy and a wolf has passed unnoticed by Laura.

One tale, which the children are not supposed to hear, is that told by Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza (LHBW, pp. 67-72) after Laura and Mary and their cousins have gone to bed. The story Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza tell is not unlike the stories Pa tells: it is the recounting of a near escape from a dangerous animal. But in the style of the best story-tellers, Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza do not reveal the nature of the danger until the end; rather, they draw the audience's attention to Prince, the family dog, as if he were the dangerous animal, and it is this purposeful mis-focusing that captures Laura's initial interest:

> Pa and Ma and Aunt Eliza and Uncle Peter sat by the fire, talking. And just as Laura was drifting off to sleep, she heard Uncle Peter say:
>
> "Eliza had a narrow squeak the other day, when

> I was away at Lake City. You know Prince, that big dog of mine?"
>
> Laura was wide awake at once. She always liked to hear about dogs. (LHBW, p. 67)

For three and a half pages, Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza tell about Prince's acting mad: he tore at Aunt Eliza's dress and would not let her out of the house. All of the detail of the story is focused on Prince's seemingly rabid behavior, and not until the denouement of the story is the reason for his action given: a panther had been lurking outside the house. Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza, like Pa, are concerned with the threat the uncontrolled wilderness holds for the controlled social group, the family.

The last chapter of Little House in the Big Woods further illustrates the security of home that is so strongly impressed in the book. Pa takes Laura and Mary upon his knee and tells them why he came home from hunting without any meat: he had seen a doe and her fawn standing together in the moonlight and he could not bear to shoot them. They represent the family, which Pa would never participate in destroying, and that family was particularly vulnerable in his eyes because they were lacking a male protector. He sees the deer as the only element of wilderness that is in control: the family.

The major emphasis of the tales Pa tells is that safety and security are to be found inside, that danger lurks outside the family threshhold, and that Pa, as protector, can control that which is out of control, the wilderness. Pa's use of family members in his stories furthers this emphasis, for the perils encountered in his tales are not far removed from the arena of experience that Laura and Mary have and are therefore immediate and viable.

Storytelling is a highly formalized ritual, one which develops into a family custom. Other family customs, which may also be highly developed but not as formalized, are those which are not dependent upon time, place, or event: they may have a greater day-to-day continuity than storytelling. It could be posited that such customs contribute to the feeling of a group as group, rather than an accidental collection of individuals. Such customs exist in great measure in Little House in the Big Woods and are validated as folklore by Dundes: ". . . Traditions often include sayings and such items as a family whistle (to call or locate a family member lost in a crowd)" (Dundes, p. 3).

The most evident of these traditions in Little House in the Big Woods is Pa's referring to Laura as "little half-pint of sweet cider half drunk up" (LHBW, p. 33), which is shortened to "little half-pint" in Little House on the Prairie, the next book in the series. Whether Pa had affectionate nicknames for his other children is not revealed in the books; we know only of this one for Laura.[4]

Other traditions are not overtly identified as traditions, but their contexts assure us that they are indeed customary behaviors. Usually Wilder achieves this textual identification of custom by setting off certain lines in quotation, as she does to show that the phrase, "saving the bacon," is an inter-family joke. When the line first appears, Pa has rescued their pig from a bear. After nine paragraphs of non-dialogue text, the line occurs, grammatically part of the preceding paragraph but set off separately:

> Laura was sorry Pa did not get the bear. She liked bear meat so much. Pa was sorry, too, but he said:
>
> "Anyway, I saved the bacon." (LHBW, p. 11)

Later, Pa sees a bear picking up a freshly killed pig and kills the bear and brings both it and the pig home. Again, the statement follows non-dialogue text and is set off in a separate paragraph:

> Pa shot the bear, and there was no way of knowing where the pig came from nor whose pig it was.
>
> "So I just brought home the bacon," Pa said. (LHBW, p. 26)

Both of these uses of "bacon" to refer to a pig is obviously an internal family joke which must have delighted Laura.

While this is not an unusual usage, Dundes says:

> Often competent investigation can show that these individual family traditions (which a family may insist are its very own, unknown to anyone outside the family) are found among many families and sometimes even among many peoples of the world. (Dundes, p. 3)

Thus, the fact that Pa may, indeed, be employing a literal usage of a common idiom, "bringing home the bacon," to refer to both the pig and his role as bread-winner, justifies its acceptance as a family folkloric element.

Pa also told riddles and jokes (LHBW, p. 22). Usually, his jokes were too subtle for Laura and Mary to understand, although they did understand that when Pa was telling a joke, the conversation had elevated to another level. When Pa tells the joke about the man who cut two cat-holes in his door, one for his big cat and one for his small cat, Mary, the older child, comes close to understanding the humor, while Laura totally misses the point:

> "But why couldn't the little cat--" Mary began.
>
> "Because the big cat wouldn't let it," Laura interrupted. (LHBW, p. 23)

Another joke, which Wilder includes probably because one tends to remember in great detail the amazingly

ridiculous theories that one as a child accepted unquestioningly, comes from Ma. Perhaps Wilder, when writing Little House in the Big Woods, recalled the conversation and wondered whether Ma realized the absurdity of her answer to Laura's question, "Did Adam have good clothes to wear on Sundays?" Ma responds, "No. . . . Poor Adam, all he had to wear was skins" (LHBW, p. 85).

Ma's contributions to the family folklore are mainly those which are connected with housekeeping. Her introduction to Laura and Mary of the theory that the moon is made of green cheese (LHBW, pp. 190-191) occurs when the children watch her making cheese and taste green (unripened) cheese.

Ma also introduces to Laura and Mary the legend of Jack Frost, who, during long winter nights, draws ice pictures on windows. Ma's success at relaying this folklore is substantiated by Laura's vivid visualization of Jack Frost:

> Laura thought that Jack Frost was a little man all snowy white, wearing a glittering white pointed cap and soft white knee-boots made of deerskin. His coat was white and his mittens were white, and he did not carry a gun on his back, but in his hands he had shining sharp tools with which he carved the pictures. (LHBW, p. 27)

Ma lets Laura and Mary draw circles in the ice on the windows with her thimble, although they never destroy Jack

Frost's paintings. This use of the thimble to make "pretty patterns" on the window reiterates the domestic orientation of Ma's folklore. Although Jack Frost is a mythic character of the outdoors, it is significant that Laura does not see him as carrying a gun: Jack Frost is Ma's folkloric property, and Laura models her picturing of him to subscribe to Ma's canon of household propriety--guns are not as much a part of the realm in which Ma operates as are aesthetics. As an artist, Jack Frost does not need to carry a gun; more important to him are the tools of his trade.

Ma's dictum of orderly housekeeping is certainly well known to most women, who have either heard it from their mothers or embroidered an entire set of seven tea towels with the inscriptions:

> Wash on Monday,
> Iron on Tuesday,
> Mend on Wednesday,
> Churn on Thursday,
> Clean on Friday,
> Bake on Saturday,
> Rest on Sunday.
> (LHBW, p. 29)

Such a system of labor, while it may seem arbitrary at first, was one which produced an efficiently managed home, for all of the days of the week were seen as preparations

for the most important day of the week: Sunday. What one could do on Sunday was not a matter of personal choice: it was a day which belonged to religion, and religion only. No work could be done. Therefore, the system for home economy was probably less folklore than necessity at the time; today, however, this ordering of weekly chores has moved from one of necessity to one of tradition.

Play activity may also reflect family folklore. In the Ingalls home, the favorite game was "mad dog," in which Pa would muss his hair, crouch on his hands and knees, and, growling, chase Laura and Mary into a corner. Mary would be scared, but Laura would grasp her and pull her over the woodbox (LHBW, p. 36). Such play activity was not simple amusement, but served as a necessary physical exercise during long winter months when outdoor activity was impossible, an outlet for spirited children. It also served to develop their reflexes, so that Laura and Mary would be able to think quickly in the dangerous woods, should they meet a wild animal.

Most of the events in Little House in the Big Woods, as in the other books in the series, are marked by the sound of Pa's fiddle. Music played an important part in the Ingallses' lives and served an important function, whether it be soothing excited children, lulling them to sleep, taking their minds off unpleasantries (which is more fully its use in The Long Winter), or simply marking an especially pleasant time. The

connection between music and folklore is noted by Eugenia Garson: "Many of Mrs. Wilder's songs were handed down through oral tradition, and her texts sometimes differed from the originals" (Garson, p. 8).

On Laura's birthday, Pa plays "Pop Goes the Weasel" as "a special birthday treat" (LHBW, p. 98). It was a favorite song of hers, for it included a game: trying to catch the weasel as Pa made the string pop with his finger.

Pa also uses music to tell stories, or to illustrate a point. When he tells Laura, "You wouldn't starve to death on Ma's whey, like old Grimes did on his wife's" (LHBW, p. 192), he sings the song "Old Grimes" to her to explain what he means:

> "Old Grimes is dead, that good old man,
> We ne'er shall see him more,
> He used to wear an old gray coat,
> All buttoned down before.
>
> Old Grimeses' [sic] wife made skim-milk cheese,
> Old Grimes, he drank the whey,
> There came an east wind from the west,
> And blew Old Grimes away." (LHBW, p. 192)

Pa tells Laura that because Old Grimes' wife was stingy and skimmed off all the cream in the whey, Old Grimes "got so thin the wind blew him away. Plumb starved to death" (LHBW, p. 193).

The closing of the book is marked by music, and the song that Pa's fiddle plays (to the tune of "Old Grimes") carries, in itself, a sense of ending, for it is our traditional New Year's Eve song, "Auld Lang Syne." It is fitting that the song which closes the year also closes the book:

> When the fiddle had stopped singing Laura called out softly, "What are the days of auld lang syne, Pa?"
>
> "They are the days of a long time ago, Laura," Pa said. "Go to sleep now."
>
> . . . .
>
> She thought to herself, "This is now."
>
> She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma, and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago. (LHBW, pp. 237-238)

William R. Bascom identified four functions of folklore: amusement, validation of cultural custom, education, and maintenance of socially acceptable behavior (Bascom, pp. 333-349). The tales that Pa tells the children in Little House in the Big Woods and the daily family traditions of the Ingalls household certainly fulfill these roles Bascom has ascribed to folklore, and further show that the Ingalls family had a strength and richness of

tradition which Laura, in the years to follow, would be able to expand upon and share with millions of children.

NOTES

[1] All textual citations of the Little House series will be given in abbreviated form:

LHBW - Little House in the Big Woods
LHP - Little House on the Prairie
BPC - On the Banks of Plum Creek
SSL - By the Shores of Silver Lake
LW - The Long Winter
LTP - Little Town on the Prairie
THGY - These Happy Golden Years
FFY - The First Four Years

[2] After Mary goes blind (between On the Banks of Plum Creek and By the Shores of Silver Lake), she shares story-telling duties with Pa. Such activity would have made her feel useful in the family despite her limitations.

[3] According to Wilder's daughter, Laura's age was changed to five in the book by the editors at Harper and Row, who felt that the readership might doubt Wilder's ability to remember events which happened when she was three (Anderson, p. 297; Mortensen, p. 428).

[4] Pa also calls Laura "Flutterbudget," a name which he uses more frequently as she nears her teens.

"IT IS BETTER FARTHER ON":
THE WESTWARD MOVEMENT
AND THE LITTLE HOUSE BOOKS

Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books examine frontier America in the years immediately following the Homestead Act of 1862. Wilder spent her childhood on the frontier as her father followed the dream the new West offered, and the books are based upon her experiences. The Little House series examines the forces which shaped the westering spirit that lured families to the Great Plains and comments on the role of the pioneer in shaping the frontier and its society.

The Ingalls family lived during a special time in America's history. Western expansion, which had been occurring since the nation's beginnings, was encouraged by the attractions of the Homestead Act. Because the logic of nineteenth century America dictated that one could not be independent if one was in debt, the Act's lure of "Free land!" became irresistible. Here was a way to become independent. Here was a way to become one's own person. Above all, here was a way to start all over. Something, too, was added with the chance to begin life anew--the

chance to see oneself with respect. As Frederick Jackson Turner said, "So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists. . ." (Turner, p. 15). Failure became an impermanent term. One could fail in one place and move on to try again elsewhere. The frontier was what William Appleman Williams has called the "mirage of an infinity of second chances" (Williams, p. 257).

Throughout the Little House series, Laura's father looks to the West for relief. Sometimes it is relief from financial distress, and sometimes it is relief from what he sees as over-population. When hunting becomes difficult because game is scarce, or when neighbors crowd too closely, Pa sees the West as a place of escape. Pa's initial interest in the West is based on his concern about the availability of game and his uneasiness with the press of other families in the Big Woods:

> In the long winter evenings he talked to Ma about the Western country. In the West the land was level, and there were no trees. There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that reached much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there. (LHP, p. 2)

When the family settles in Indian Territory, Pa assures Ma:

> "This is a country I'll be contented to stay in the rest of my life."
>
> "Even when it's settled up?" Ma asked.
>
> "Even when it's settled up. No matter how thick and close the neighbors get, this country'll never feel crowded." (LHP, p. 74)

Pa never gets a chance to see Indian Territory settled, for he is the victim of the unreliable information about the West that plagued both settlers and would-be settlers. While the Ingallses are moving from the Big Woods, Laura asks Ma whether they are in Indian country:

> Ma said she didn't know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn't know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long. Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement. They could not know, because Washington was so far away. (LHP, p. 47)

Pa's information was, as the Ingallses discover at the end of Little House on the Prairie, incorrect, or, at best, incomplete. On the census schedule of 1870, no land value is listed after the Ingallses' names; instead, a note is written: "The reason no value was carried out . . . is

that the Lands belong to the Osage Indians and Settlers had no title to said Lands" (Zochert, p. 43).[1]

When Mr. Scott tells Pa that the settlers will be forced off Indian land by the government, Pa decides to leave before he can "be taken away by the soldiers like an outlaw" (LHP, p. 316).[2] This time he moves the family to Minnesota, to Plum Creek where, after a while, he finds game becoming scarce. He says to Ma, "It's a fine place we have here, but there isn't much game. Makes a fellow think of places out West where--" but Ma cuts him off with a reminder that the children must have schooling (BPC, p. 283).

After the family has scarlet fever, and Mary goes blind, the children's education becomes a secondary consideration. There are the day to day exigencies which must be faced, and life looks bleak:

> Only a few small fish were left in Plum Creek. Even the little cottontail rabbits had been hunted until they were scarce.
>
> Pa did not like a country so old and worn out that the hunting was poor. He wanted to go west. For two years he had wanted to go west and take a homestead, but Ma did not want to leave the settled country. And there was no money. Pa had made only two poor wheat crops since the grasshoppers came; he had barely been able to keep out of

> debt, and now there was the doctor's bill. (SSL, pp. 2-3)

Pa sees homesteading as the only chance they have: he is defeated at Plum Creek. Aunt Docia's offer of a job for him in the Dakota Territory seems like a two-fold answer to a prayer. First, it offers immediate financial relief, and second, it offers Pa the opportunity to try homesteading. Homesteading means another move, but the Ingalls family has no choice: they stay in Plum Creek and face certain failure, or they move and face possible failure--or success. Homesteading was a gamble, but, like many others, the Ingallses had nothing to gamble with but failure itself.

In the Little House books, the theme of homesteading as gambling is expressed plainly. At Silver Lake, the sight of the homestead in the Dakota Territory, Pa says:

> ". . . I've bet Uncle Sam fourteen dollars against a hundred and sixty acres of land, that we can make out to live on the claim for five years." (SSL, p. 237)

Pa considers the basis of the bet to be his ability to succeed at what is apparently an easy enough task--residing on one hundred and sixty acres of land for five years. However, the terms of the Homestead Act of 1862 included breaking five of the one hundred and sixty acres the first

year. In order for the sod to rot and form arable land, the ground had to be plowed in June (Zochert, p. 150). Before it could be plowed, it had to be mowed, and that meant buying a mowing machine. The land was, in fact, free,[3] but the machinery was not: new farms required approximately $700 worth of machinery for optimum operation (Hine, p. 165).[4]

Making good ("proving up") on a claim was an expensive proposition. While Pa sees the Homestead Act as a way to future economic freedom and prosperity ("In time we'll build more rooms on this house, and maybe have a driving team and a buggy. . . . We'll have a garden and a little field, but mostly raise hay and cattle" [SSL, p. 285]), a neighbor of the Ingallses, Mrs. McKee, sees the pitfalls of the Act in more immediate terms.

In a tirade about the laws governing homesteading, Mrs. McKee notes that the laws are cruel and defacing, constructed not to allow the individual to free him- or herself from previous financial restrictions, but to force the homesteader into serving a period of humiliating and degrading indentureship to the government:

> "I don't know why the law makes us do this," she said. "What earthly good it does, to make a woman stay on a claim all summer."
>
> "It's a bet, Pa says," Laura answered. "The government bets a man a quarter-section of land,

> that he can't stay on it five years without starving to death."
>
> "Nobody could," said Mrs. McKee. "Whoever makes these laws ought to know that a man that's got enough money to farm, has got enough to buy a farm. If he hasn't got the money, he's got to earn it, so why do they make a law that he's got to stay on a claim, when he can't? All it means is, his wife and family have got to sit idle on it, seven months of the year. I could be earning something, dressmaking to help buy tools and seeds, if somebody didn't have to sit on this claim. I declare to goodness, I don't know but sometimes I believe in woman's rights. If women were voting and making laws, I believe they'd have better sense." (THGY, pp. 118-119)

Under the provisions of the Homestead Act, land was available for sale as well as for claiming. And in this sense Mrs. McKee was right: the law seemed to allow the poor citizen an equal footing with the wealthy one, but the costs to the farmer for successfully completing a claim were steep enough to prevent the poor from realizing that equality.[5]

In addition to machinery expenses, day to day expenses of family living had to be met somehow. No crop except hay could be harvested the first year, and, as helpful as the

hay might be, it was not food for the family nor shoes for the children. And when the capricious midwestern seasons took their toll on the crops with their extremes of heat, cold, and pests, how was the settler to support the family--without a crop and without losing the claim?

There were two answers to this dilemma. One was that the family unit split, and at least one member of the family work off the claim. If the crops in the area have not all been ruined, members of the family might be fortunate enough to find work in town. When Laura goes into town to work for Mrs. White at shirt-making, she notices the change in the population of the town:

> The boys and girls that Laura had met in town last winter were not there now. They had gone out to stay on homestead claims. The storekeepers stayed in town to run their stores and bach in the rooms behind them, while wives and children lived all summer out on the prairie in claim shanties. For the law was that a man could not keep a homestead claim unless his family lived on it, six months of every year for five years. Also he must keep ten acres of the sod broken up and planted to crops for five years, before the Government would give him a title to his land. But nobody could make a living from that wild land. So the women and

> girls stayed all summer in claim shanties to satisfy the law, and the boys broke the sod and planted the crops, while the fathers built the town and tried to make money enough to buy food and tools from the East. (THGY, pp. 49-50)

If the claim was close enough for the working member/s of the family to walk to, as it was for the Ingallses (both Pa and Laura work in town one summer), the family may stay together. But often, as in the case of the McKees, the family is broken apart because the claim is too far away from town, and visits home can be made only on the weekends.

The second option for the homesteader facing a financial problem was for the family to go into debt, usually further into debt. The First Four Years encompasses the beginning years of Laura and Almanzo's marriage and describes four growing seasons, focusing on the financial problems the newlyweds face.

The first year the crop is destroyed by hail. Almanzo already deeply in debt for machinery, chattel mortgages on the horses, and building loans on the house, faces more bills for coal and spring seed. He rents out the tree claim, sells the working team of horses, and mortgages the homestead.

The second year the crop is smaller than expected because rainfall has been sparse, but the harvest is enough

to pay the interest on the loans and the doctor's bills for their daughter's birth, so the Wilders stay afloat.

The third year a heat wave destroys the wheat, and diphtheria leaves Laura weak and Almanzo permanently physically impaired. The renter leaves the tree claim, so Almanzo sells the homestead and he and Laura move onto the tree claim. As a gamble, they put all of their money into a crop that the weather will not affect as greatly as it does wheat: they buy sheep.

The fourth year, Almanzo buys two more oxen to finish breaking the sod on his one hundred and sixty acres and puts in a seeding of wheat, only to have dust storms blow it away. He reseeds, but drought and hot winds destroy the crop. The sale of the sheep's wool saves them from utter financial collapse, but they face another problem: the hot winds which destroyed the crops have also killed most of the trees. It is time to prove up and Almanzo cannot do it, so he must pre-empt. After he does, their newborn son dies, and their house burns down, causing them to face the expense of rebuilding it.

The First Four Years ends on a positive note, however, as Laura "felt her spirit rising for the struggle" she and Almanzo face (FFY, p. 133), but Wilder's biographer notes that within a year of the date at which the series ends, the Wilders left the Dakotas and spent a year in Minnesota and a year in Florida (Zochert, pp. 193-194). Almanzo did

not win his bet with the government: the prairie did.

There was more to pioneering, however, than farming and land-ownership. As the pioneers struggled with carving an existence from the harsh environment, they were also developing a society. Some of their cultural activities were vestiges of the activities they knew from the Eastern homes; others were their own inventions, specially oriented for this new habitat. These activities reflected the pioneers' desire to make their surroundings true homes:

> Yet the frontiersman . . . was an idealist as well as a materialist. He admired material objects not only as symbols of advancing civilization but as the substance of his hopes for a better future. . . . This spirit inspired the cultural activities that blossomed at an early stage on every frontier--the literary societies, the debating clubs, the "thespian groups," the libraries, the schools, the camp meetings--just as it helped fasted on the pioneers an infinite faith in the future. (Billington, p. 21)

Until the Ingallses live near a town, their entertainment is home-centered. Even the "sugaring off" dance in the Big Woods has only relatives as guests (LHBW, pp. 131-155). The introduction of non-kinship functions marked

the beginnings of a real community on the frontier and were anticipated and enjoyed immensely by the settlers. For the Ingallses, church elicits as much excitement as a dance:

> Laura and Mary had never seen a church. But they knew from Ma's voice that going to church must be better than a party. After a while Ma said, "I am so glad I finished my new dress." (BPC, p. 178)

When De Smet becomes large enough to support cultural activities, they all seem to begin at once in what Ma calls "a whirl of gaiety" (LTP, p. 238). First is the "Dime Sociable," sponsored by the newly-organized Ladies' Aid Society (LTP, pp. 201-209). Although Laura says afterwards that she did not enjoy it (and her friend Mary Powers quite bluntly states, "I'd rather have the dime" [LTP, p. 208]), Ma does not dismiss such activities as frivolous, citing a Chicago-based periodical as her authority:

> "This is only the first sociable," Ma made excuse. "No doubt when folks here are better acquainted, the sociables will be more interesting. I know from reading The Advance that church sociables are greatly enjoyed." (LTP, p. 209)

Soon after the sociable, the town organizes a literary society. The term is employed loosely, for its functions ("Literaries") included spelling bees (LTP, pp. 216-220), charades (LTP, pp. 221-222), musical programs (LTP, pp. 222-223), debates (LTP, p. 233), a comedy act (LTP, pp. 236-238), and a minstrel show (LTP, pp. 256-260).

Other cultural activities included a New England Supper sponsored by the Ladies' Aid Society (LTP, pp. 226-233), revivals (LTP, p. 274, et passim), a School Exhibition (LTP, pp. 283-294), and a singing school (THGY, p. 199, et passim). Such community affairs gave a sense of permanency to the settlement, thus establishing the pioneer's belief that his or her activities had a purpose and a future.

Societies were conscious creations of the settlers, who recognized the need for cultural stimulation on the often austere prairie. As the pioneer shaped the prairie, so the prairie shaped the pioneer. The curious mingling of the bucolic fantasy of the mythic frontier, in which the land gratefully received the attention of the yeoman farmer, with the actual frontier, in which the land often fought the farmer, produced a person who was capable of retaining dreams while struggling to stay alive, who could plan for his or her future while considering and re-examining the trappings of civilization. The pioneer was close sighted and far sighted at the same time, and this unique amalgam of

vision produced the singular personality of the pioneer:

> That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom--these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (Turner, pp. 17-18)

The personality of the pioneer is not a readily apparent one, for it is based on a curious mingling of myth, dream, faith, poverty, greed, and countless other non-correlative factors and motivations. No single factor can be determined to be the sole source.

What Ray Billington calls "the heady optimism, the blind faith in the future, [and] the belief in the inevitability of progress" (Billington, p. 22), appear to be the hall-marks of the pioneer creed, and, in fact, Wilder echoes the same creed in much the same terms:

> The incurable optimism of the farmer who throws his seed on the ground every spring, betting it

> and his time against the elements, seemed inextricably to blend with the creed of her pioneer forefathers that "it is better farther on"--only instead of farther on in space, it was farther on in time, over the horizon of the years ahead instead of the far horizon of the west. (FFY, p. 134)

It took a certain kind of person to be a success at pioneering, one who possessed what Wilder identified as the pioneer spirit, one "of humor and cheerfulness no matter what happened. . . . My parents possessed this frontier spirit to a marked degree. . . . They looked forward to better things" (Moore 1980, p. 105).

The character of the pioneer is easily romanticized. But the pioneer's actions were not entirely laudable. The frontier desire for "better things" included a rapacious appetite for the land and all that was on it, and Wilder does not ignore or excuse the offenses perpetrated by the pioneer against the land or its original people, the Indians. Laura is introduced to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny one night when Pa sings the legend of the Indian maiden, Alfarata, to her, and Laura asks where the voice of Alfarata went:

> "Oh I suppose she went west," Ma answered. "That's what the Indians do."

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

"They have to," Ma said.

"Why do they have to?"

"The government makes them, Laura," said Pa. "Now go to sleep."

He played the fiddle softly for a while. Then Laura asked, "Please, Pa, can I ask just one more question?"

"May I," said Ma.

Laura began again. "Please, Pa, may I--"

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

"Will the government make these Indians go west?"

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

"Yes, Pa," Laura said. "But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to--"

> "No more questions, Laura," Pa said, firmly. "Go to sleep." (LHP, pp. 236-237)

Pa's reluctance--or inability--to explain the logic behind Manifest Destiny illustrates his recognition of its inherent difficulties. Yet it is precisely this doctrine which allows him to satisfy his wanderlust (Segel, p. 68) and, while it ultimately does him no good in Indian Territory, which allows him to eventually achieve his dream of earning land through the provisions of the Homestead Act.

The pioneers' prevailing attitude toward Native Americans extends to their attitudes toward the land itself. As pioneers emptied an area of its land and its trees, they moved on, leaving behind them a trail of ecologically depleted lands. The rapidity with which this rape of the "virgin land" (Smith, passim) took place does not escape Laura's notice, and she does not hesitate to place the blame where it belongs:

> Only a little while before the vast herds of thousands of buffaloes had grazed over this country. They had been the Indians' cattle, and white men had slaughtered them all. (SSL, pp. 61-62)

As Wilder questions the moral and sociological ramifications of frontiering, she must include Pa and, eventually,

herself among those who, in their love for the wilderness, destroyed its very wildness (Segel, pp. 69-70). Early in the series, Pa rejoices in the West as a place in which he can fulfill his dream of self-sufficiency:

> "This country's cram-jammed with game," he told her [Laura]. "I saw fifty deer if I saw one, and antelope, squirrels, rabbits, birds of all kinds. The creek's full of fish." He said to Ma, "I tell you, Caroline, there's everything we want here. We can live like kings!" (LHP, pp. 49-50)

Yet, by participating in the settling of the Western lands, Pa shares the responsibility for the destruction of the land's assets which drew him there originally:

> "Not a goose within gunshot," he said. "The whole flock rose when it came to Silver Lake and kept on going north. They must have seen the new buildings and heard the noise. Looks like hunting's going to be slim around here from now on." (SSL, p. 245)

Pa has, with the other settlers in the area, decided the future of what he has always deemed important--hunting--each time he fired a shot or hammered a nail. He has destroyed his own dream.

The Little House books are a chronicle of the pioneer experience. When Wilder said in 1937, during the writing of By the Shores of Silver Lake, that she intended to write "a seven-volume historical novel for children covering every aspect of the American frontier" (Moore 1980, p. 105), she implied that the books were to be read as a whole rather than as individual titles, thus providing not only an historical account but an historical perspective by one of the participants in the westward movement. She clarified the veracity of her account of the homesteading years by saying, "Every story in this novel, all the circumstances, are true. All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth" (Moore 1980, p. 108).

What was the "whole truth"? In a letter to Wilder, her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, wrote, "The truth is a meaning underlying them [the facts]" (Moore 1980, p. 108). Wilder's strict point of view and adherence to the facts of experience did not allow her to comment directly upon or interpret the westering experience from the standpoint of an adult. Nowhere in the Little House books will one find a wholesale endorsement of frontiering as a way of life. Frontiering was exciting, and the excitement of seeing the prairie in its natural state permeates Wilder's work. That excitement is, however, tinged with sorrow, as Laura witnesses the spoiling of the prairie by the white settlers who kill the buffalo, treat the Indians poorly, and build

towns like De Smet, which was "like a sore on the beautiful, wild prairie" (LTP, p. 49).

Such judgments are, however, only implied in the Little House books. They are a part of the "whole truth" of the westward movement which must, for Wilder, remain unspoken and unwritten, for it lies not in the immediately apprehensible moment of occurrence, but in the perspective of experience found only "over the horizon of the years ahead."

NOTES

[1] When the land was finally taken from the Indians, it could not be homesteaded; it had to be bought from the government (Hine, p. 161).

[2] According to Wilder's biographer, the Ingalls family left Indian Territory to go back to the Big Woods (a move which is not included in the series), not because they were forced to leave but because the man who was buying their Wisconsin house wanted to go west and asked Pa to take back their old house (Zochert, p. 46).

[3] The fourteen dollars Pa mentions was apparently an administrative fee, although ten dollars was the usual amount (Hine, p. 161).

[4] Between 1860 and 1900, the production of farm machinery escalated in the United States from a value of $21,000,000 to $101,000,000 (Hine, p. 160). This drastic increase was undoubtedly due in part to the westward movement.

[5] The Homestead Act was designed to assist the government in settling--and thus gaining control of--the western part of the continent. Although it actually benefited relatively few people, it did achieve the government's

goal: between 1862 and 1890, only 372,659 homestead claims were successfully completed, although the population of homesteaded states grew by over ten million people (Smith, p. 190).

"I HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN LITTLE HOUSES": WILDER'S PORTRAITS OF FRONTIER WOMEN

When Laura Ingalls Wilder was writing the Little House books, she stated that her goal was to write "a seven-volume historical novel for children covering every aspect of the American frontier" (Moore 1980, p. 105). Included in her treatment of the new West was an interpretation of the lives and attitudes of the women who settled there. Because most of the characters in the Little House books are female, and because the books are based upon actual people and events in Wilder's life, the series provides a unique look at the women who settled in the West. Running through the books is the theme of a contrast between Ma and Laura and their reactions to the frontier environment, a basic contrast of the adult transplanted to the frontier and the child planted in the frontier. Both Ma and Laura develop symbols of self-identification, and the focus of the symbols defines their differences. An examination of these symbols and, further, the character portrayals of Ma and Laura provides a clarification of what some frontier female experience was actually like.

The pioneer woman who came westward with her husband was lucky indeed if she shared his passion for "roughing it." But many women went westward only to be with their husbands: had the women chosen not to go, they would have been, in essence, disobeying the teachings of their upbringing--that is, that a woman's place is with her husband. One pioneer woman, asked why she went west, answered simply, "Wherever he [my husband] goes, that is my home" (Ryan, p. 14). Women were never to question where that home might be. Such questions were not a part of a traditional eastern lifestyle, one in which families settled in an area and stayed for generations. Thus the frontier woman had no behavioral guides for dealing with her transplanting to another location. She was forced to formulate her own answers from her contemporary texts of socialization: the Bible and Godey's Lady's Book. Of the two, the latter brought more specific help to the woman confronting emigration. Not only did it contain reviews of guide-books to the West (Jeffrey, p. 9), but Godey's provided a link with what was still the place of fashion authority--the East. When Ma makes Mary's clothes for her college trip, she mourns the lack of Godey's as a guide for style (LTP, pp. 90-91).

In an attempt to make the transition to the West easier, women often brought symbols of their past with them, reminders of a life style that had once been theirs.

Ma's memento is the china shepherdess, an image which permeates the books with her essence. For Ma, the shepherdess represents home. The placing of the shepherdess on the mantel, or later on the what-not, signifies Ma's acceptance of the quarters as "home." When the family moves into the surveyor's house at Silver Lake, Pa asks Ma where the china shepherdess is:

> "I haven't unpacked the shepherdess, Charles," said Ma. "We aren't living here, we're only staying till you get our homestead." (SSL, p. 74)

The shepherdess also represents the gentility that Ma feels must be carried into the wilderness, a civilizing force. When Pa finishes putting down the puncheon floor in Kansas, Ma adds her touches, her elements of civilization--a red-checkered tablecloth and the china shepherdess. "'There,' she said. 'Now we're living like civilized folks again'" (LHP, p. 129). The china shepherdess represents a settling and merging of the expectations of frontier life and the romanticized dream of its possibilities. It is a sustaining image of an ideal--the female version of the mythic yeoman farmer. As Elizabeth Segel notes:

> Mrs. Wilder skillfully employs the little china shepherdess, carefully transported and proudly brought out to transform each new rough cabin

> into home, to sum up this poignant need of our pioneer women to preserve evidence of the gentility in which they were raised. (Segel, p. 66)

The china figurine also represents a continuity of the past with the present. Each time that the china woman is placed with honor in the house, Wilder notes that it has not changed:

> Ma spread the between-meals red-checkered cloth on the table, and on it she set the shining-clean lamp. She laid there the paper-covered Bible, the big green Wonders of the Animal World, and the novel named Millbank. The two benches stood neatly by the table.
>
> The last thing, Pa hung the bracket on the wall by the front window, and Ma stood the little china shepherdess on it.
>
> That was the wood-brown bracket that Pa had carved with stars and vines and flowers, for Ma's Christmas long ago. That was the same smiling little shepherdess, with golden hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks, her little china bodice laced with china-gold ribbons and her little china apron and her little china shoes. She had travelled from the Big Woods all the way to Indian Territory,

> and all the way to Plum Creek in Minnesota, and there she stood smiling. She was not broken. She was not nicked or even scratched. She was the same little shepherdess, smiling the same smile. (BPC, pp. 122-123)

This passage shows the strongest identification of Ma and the china shepherdess: just as the figurine is "not broken, . . . nicked or even scratched" by her experience, neither is Ma. And to further define this identification, no one but Ma is allowed to touch the china shepherdess (LHP, p. 118; BPC, p. 315).

Many women brought symbols of home with them when they ventured westward. Because space in the covered wagons was at a premium, such symbols had to be small and were often knick-knacks (Jeffrey, p. 38). The value of such symbols as literary devices did not go unnoticed by writers chronicling the female frontier experience. In A Lantern in Her Hand, a novel based upon a melange of women's experiences on the prairie, Bess Streeter Aldrich uses a strand of pearls to represent Abbie Deal's tie with her past, a symbol of "everything that was fine and artistic and lovely" (Aldrich, p. 197).

Some writings about the frontier woman focus strongly on her relationship with the male Indian, who appeared to present more of a problem to her than did the frontier. This problem can be superficially diagnosed as a sexual

one: the woman saw in the Indian a potential threat to her virtue. The captivity narrative, a popular form of literature in the United States since the seventeenth century, stressed the insatiable desire of the "red" man for the "white" woman, especially those sensationalized accounts which predominated after 1800 (Armitage, p. 6). Other stories, such as those Mrs. Scott tries to tell Ma (LHP, pp. 211-212), concentrated on the woman's peril during a massacre. Yet a woman's dislike of Indians was not based solely upon her fear of being raped or killed, but upon her feeling that the Indians were encroaching upon her personal domain, the home, and, particularly, the kitchen, where, she had been trained to believe, she was consummate. The Indians, who had not been taught to seek admittance before entering a home, often walked into the pioneer household and demanded or simply took what they needed. Such unscheduled and uninvited visits were, for the pioneer woman, violations not only of her "personal space" but of her socially assigned role. She was asked to compromise her trained ideals to the immediate situation:

> The pioneer woman's major role was that of domestic provider and sustainer. She was responsible for feeding and clothing her children

> and husband. For her, the Indian demands posed a frightful choice: between the needs of her immediate family and the wider social demand for peace with the Indians. She had to silence her domestic instincts and training and give away scarce, often irreplaceable food supplies. She had to adapt her role to the new reality. (Armitage, p. 9)

Such visits from the Indians were frequent at the Ingalls (and, later, the Wilder) home. They took food and tobacco, but rarely more than they needed. When two Indians come into the Ingalls home searching for food, one picks up Pa's pile of furs, but his companion stops him from taking them:

> Those Indians were dirty and scowling and mean. They acted as if the house belonged to them. One of them looked through Ma's cupboard and took all the cornbread. The other took Pa's tobacco pouch. They looked at the pegs where Pa's gun belonged. Then one of them picked up the bundle of furs. . . .
>
> He carried them as far as the door. Then the other Indian said something to him. They made harsh sounds at each other in their throats, and he dropped the furs. They went away. (LHP, pp. 233-234)

Usually the man of the house was not at home when the Indians dropped by, and his absence underscored the frontier woman's "new reality." Whereas the man had previously been totally accountable for the family's protection, suddenly the woman was faced with a great deal of that responsibility. Pa, who does not dislike the Indians to the same extent as Ma, realizes what a potentially hazardous situation she faces each time her territory is invaded. After the first time Ma surrenders her food stores to Indians, Pa reassures her, "You did the right thing. . . . We don't want to make enemies of any Indians" (LHP, p. 143).

Ma's dislike of the Indians is stressed in the Little House books, usually in contrast to Pa's reserved judgment of them:

> "They are perfectly friendly," said Pa. He often met Indians in the woods where he was hunting. There was nothing to fear from Indians.
>
> "No," Ma said. But Laura knew that Ma was afraid of Indians. (LHP, p. 263)

However, Pa meets Indians in entirely different situations than does Ma. It is he who meets Soldat du Chêne, the Osage who dissuades the tribes on Lesser Reserve from attacking the white settlers, and it is he who meets, in town at the store where many other men are present, the lone Indian who warns the settlers about the impending

long winter. He is never at home when the Indians invade the Ingalls home and make their demands. The one time he is at home when an Indian stops by, they exchange greetings before the Indian dismounts from his horse. The Indian shares an uneasy and silent meal with the Ingallses, and afterwards Pa and Ma discuss it. Although Pa does understand Ma's fears, he does not experience the feeling of invasion that Ma does when suddenly an Indian appears beside her in the house:

> "Let the Indians keep themselves to themselves," said Ma, "and we will do the same. I don't like Indians around underfoot."
>
> Pa told her not to worry.
>
> "That Indian was perfectly friendly," he said. (LHP, p. 229)

Pa does not seem to understand that Ma's fears are not only for her physical safety, but for her privacy and the future of her family's sustenance. A woman like Ma, who was not fully satisfied with the pioneering life, read menace in the food-taking of the Indians, for such activities seemed to be continual reminders that the white people's place on the frontier was tenuous, and reinforced an already present fear that food--or rather the lack of it--might be their eventual undoing (Armitage, p. 9).

Women confronted other perils on the frontier, and one of the major dangers they faced was themselves. Forced

to leave behind them their training and their dreams, women encountered new challenges for which they were unprepared mentally, and for which they often had to reach deeply into wells of creative power they did not know existed. If those wells were shallow or remained undiscovered, the women experienced desperation so severe that many could not battle it and lost their sanity.

Ma possessed a deep well, and it is this creative power which marks her personality as one of great ingenuity. She improvises both games and food to keep her family's minds off pressing problems: for instance, when the blackbirds eat almost all of the corn the Ingallses have been planning on for income, she saves what is left by making parched corn for winter, and she fries some of the blackbirds and makes others into a pie (LTP, pp. 102-106). This is more than economy, or "making do." Ma is expressing her creativity in the sphere where she is the most expert: the home. The bleakest of times seem to stimulate her creativity. Ma's motto is "There's no great loss without some small gain" (LTP, p. 102). Although she is referring to physical gain, her motto can be applied to mental gain: by frying the blackbirds, she is transforming them from agents of destruction (destroyers of the crop) to agents of support (food). There is a triumph of justice--what eats their food becomes their food.

When Laura leaves De Smet to teach, she meets a woman without the well of creativity, Mrs. Brewster, at whose house Laura stays. Mrs. Brewster intensely hates living on the claim and does not disguise her feelings, alternating sullen silences with loud complaints about her environment. She complains, too, about having to house Laura, and one scene in particular points out the dichotomous relationship between Mrs. Brewster and Laura--the difference between the ways they perceive their lives. As Mrs. Brewster rails against Laura's presence, Laura lies in her bed and cannot help overhearing:

> Mrs. Brewster was quarreling now about the flat country and the wind and the cold; she wanted to go back East. Suddenly Laura understood; "She isn't mad at me, she's only quarreling about me because she wants to quarrel. She's a selfish, mean woman."
>
> Mr. Brewster did not say a word, Laura thought: "I've just got to bear it, too. There isn't anywhere else I can stay."
>
> When she awoke in the morning she thought: "I have only to get through one day at a time." (THGY, p. 23)

What Laura does not understand is that she and Mrs. Brewster have, during the weeks they share a house, the same problem. Like Laura, Mrs. Brewster has no place else to go, and,

like Laura, she can hope only to get through one day at a time. What Laura does have that Mrs. Brewster does not is the knowledge that this dreadful experience will soon be over: Mrs. Brewster, on the other hand, sees her life continuing in this same hopeless pattern until she dies.

Mrs. Brewster does eventually give way under this strain, and Laura witnesses the eruption. Laura has just gone to sleep when:

> A scream woke her up. Mrs. Brewster screamed, "You kicked me!"
>
> "I did not," Mr. Brewster said. "But I will, if you don't put up that butcher knife."
>
> Laura sat straight up. Moonlight was streaming over her bed from the window. Mrs. Brewster screamed again, a wild sound without words that made Laura's scalp crinkle.
>
> "Take that knife back to the kitchen," Mr. Brewster said.
>
> Laura peeped through the crack between the curtains. The moonlight shone through the calico, and thinned the darkness so that Laura saw Mrs. Brewster standing there. Her long white flannel nightgown trailed on the floor and her black hair fell loose over her shoulders. In her upraised hand she held the butcher knife. Laura had never been so terribly frightened.

"If I can't go home one way, I can another," said Mrs. Brewster.

"Go put that knife back," said Mr. Brewster. He lay still, but tensed to spring.

"Will you or won't you?" she demanded.

"You'll catch your death of cold," he said. "I won't go over that again, this time of night. I've got you and Johnny to support, and nothing in the world but this claim. Go put up that knife and come to bed before you freeze."

The knife stopped shaking, and Mrs. Brewster's fist clenched on the handle.

"Go put it back in the kitchen," Mr. Brewster ordered.

After a moment, Mrs. Brewster turned and went to the kitchen. (THGY, pp. 64-66)

Mrs. Brewster is not a willing pioneer, and the sacrifices she has been asked to make are not satisfied by her new life. When oral protests failed, such women were forced into articulating their objections in other ways. For some women on the frontier, insanity was the only response to primitive conditions which seemed to register with their husbands as protest worth recognition (McKnight, p. 27).

The late 1800's marked a crucial time in the development of the American woman: she was confronting what seemed

in essence to be an opportunity for freedom--the right to vote. The suffrage movement seemed to garner its earliest support from the new West, for Wyoming was the first state to extend the right to vote to women in 1869, and Utah followed suit in 1870. Although it may seem that the West fostered a new way of thinking with its new way of living, in fact the extension of the suffrage right to women was a way of maintaining previous male-dominant patterns. In Utah, for example, the extension of the right to vote to women perpetuated Mormon polygamy there when it was being questioned elsewhere in the nation: the federal government rescinded this right in 1887, seeing the end of female suffrage in Utah as the only way to stop legal polygamous marriage (Hine, p. 175; Jeffrey, pp. 190-191).

Rarely was women's suffrage considered a way of allowing women to express their opinions; instead, women were discouraged from actively participating in political activities even after they had been granted the vote (Jeffrey, pp. 191-192). Thus, when Mrs. McKee, a neighbor of the Ingallses, says about the terms of the Homestead Act, "If women were voting and making laws, I believe they'd have better sense" (THGY, p. 119), she is linking two disparate activities--the right to vote did not guarantee the right to determine legislation.

Female suffrage was often seen as the only issue in the women's rights campaign. When Almanzo asks Laura if

she is "for woman's rights," Laura says, "No . . . I do not want to vote" (THGY, p. 269). But she does take a stand on another issue--the use of the word "obey" in the wedding ceremony. Almanzo agrees with her that she should not use it, and he has apparently already spoken to the minister about it, for he tells Laura that the minister does not believe in using "obey" in the ceremony either. Almanzo's reasoning behind his not supporting the usage in the wedding ceremony illustrates his acceptance of the equality of women:

> "I know it is in the wedding ceremony, but it is only something women say. I never knew one that did it, nor any decent man that wanted her to." (THGY, p. 269)

Laura sees the use of the word "obey" in the wedding ceremony as forcing her into a lie (". . . I can not make a promise that I will not keep" [THGY, p. 269]), but other women on the frontier found that the use of the word violated the relationship between husband and wife that had grown up in the new West, as both of them struggled in a partnership to make their life together successful. As another frontier bride explained:

> I already had ideas of my own about the husband being the head of the family. . . . I had taken the precaution to sound him on "obey" in the

> marriage pact and found that he did not approve of the term. Approval or no approval, that word "obey" would have to be left out. I had served my time of tutelage to my parents as all children are supposed to do. I was a woman now and capable of being the other half of the head of the family. His word and my word would have equal strength. God had endowed me with reason and understanding and a sense of responsibility. (Stratton, p. 58)

Women in nineteenth century America were not consciously considered lesser beings than men, but functions in the family and society were determined by gender: women had their place and men had theirs. It was seen as a simple division of roles with no hierarchy involved (Ryan, p. 139). Together they would work to form a home and a life, and each had a part to play which was particularly important to that goal.

It was precisely this division of roles which forced Ma into compromise--uncomfortably. Work could not wait until a male child was born and raised to an age at which he could assist on the farm. Because the Ingallses do not have any male children (the one which they did have died shortly after birth), Ma must reluctantly allow Laura to abandon her assigned role as a female so that the necessary labor on the claim could be accomplished. When the hay must be stacked and there is no money to hire men, Ma allows Laura to help:

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

Ma, like other women of her time, had been raised on school texts which celebrated the feminine bearing. According to one text, a woman's "voice is gentle; her pronounciation [sic] is delicate; her passions are never suffered to be boisterous . . . she never foams with anger; she is seldom seen in any masculine amusement" (Jeffrey, p. 9). The effects of this upbringing upon Ma's standards of female propriety are clearly evident when she speaks to Laura before Laura and Pa leave their home to spend an afternoon watching the men build the railroad through Silver Lake:

> After Pa had gone back to the store, Ma talked seriously to Laura. She said that she wanted her girls to know how to behave, to speak nicely in low voices and have gentle manners and always be ladies. . . . She wanted Laura to stay away from the camp, and not get acquainted with any of the rough men there. It would be all right for her to go quietly with Pa to see the work

> this once, but she must be well-behaved and ladylike, and remember that a lady never did anything that could attract attention. (SSL, pp. 95-96)

Ma also warns Laura not to take her cousin Lena with her, for Lena "is boisterous, and Docia [her mother] has not curbed her as much as she might" (SSL, p. 96).

Laura's initiation into the ways of genteel womanhood is continued into her teens. When Laura speaks too loudly, Ma reminds her that she must always behave like a lady:

> "Modulate your voice, Laura," Ma said gently. "Remember, 'Her voice was ever gentle, low, and soft, an excellent thing in a woman.'" (LTP, p. 97)

Ma's views on proper female activity are at odds with Laura's: Ma wants Laura to wear a sunbonnet, which Laura hates ("When her sunbonnet was on she could see only what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat" [LHP, p. 123]); Ma urges Laura to wear her corsets to bed, but Laura resists (". . . Laura could not bear the torment of the steels that would not let her draw a deep breath. Always before she could get to sleep, she had to take off her corsets" [LTP, p. 94]); Ma tries to encourage Laura to sew, although Laura hates it ("Sewing made Laura feel like flying to pieces. She wanted to

scream. The back of her neck ached and the thread twisted and knotted. She had to pick out almost as many stitches as she put in" [LW, p. 33]). What Ma wants for Laura is the accepted female role, one of restriction. The sunbonnet, like blinders on a horse, restricts her vision, the corset restricts her breathing, and the tedious hours of sewing restrict her freedom. Laura wants that freedom.

Laura's desire for the freedom offered by the West is a major theme of the Little House books. That this desire is seen by Wilder as being in contraposition to the usual standards for women on the frontier is made apparent by the careful identification of her longings with her father's: other women in the series do not express the same identification with the frontier that Laura does. One day in exasperation Laura blurts out, "I want to go West" (LTP, p. 212), and later Pa says the same thing, "I would like to go West" (THGY, p. 138). The closeness of purpose between Pa and Laura is emphasized by a paragraph following Pa's outburst:

> Laura knew how he felt for she saw the look in his blue eyes as he gazed over the rolling prairie westward from the open door where he stood. He must stay in a settled country for the sake of them all, just as she must teach school again, though she did so hate to be shut into a schoolroom. (THGY, p. 139)

Laura is fortunate to marry a man who shares her attraction to the prairie, and it is this concordance in approach to their environment which gives them the strong marriage they have. Although the prairie seems to be set against them, she loves it still and shares Almanzo's reluctance to leave it:

> She was still the pioneer girl and she could understand Manly's love of the land through its appeal to herself. (FFY, p. 134)

Laura recognizes the source of this "appeal":

> "Oh, well," Laura sighed, summing up her idea of the situation in a saying of her Ma's, "we'll always be farmers, for what is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh." (FFY, p. 134)

What did not "come out in the flesh" is Ma's assessment of the pioneer lifestyle. Laura's symbols of self-identification are those of the wildness of the frontier. After she leaves the Big Woods, her preferences switch: instead of favoring the inner (safe) over the outer (unsafe), she is drawn to the outer and repelled by the inner. This is the source of her statement to Pa, "I like wolves better [than cattle]" in spite of Pa's reminder that "Cattle are more useful" (BPC, p. 79). As the series progresses, Laura appropriates more symbols, the strongest

of which are Indians and ponies. She initially hesitates before accepting them, as she does with the wolves, for she recognizes in them a capacity for ferocity--a savagery which is echoed in the prairie, Laura's over-riding symbol of self-identification.

Ma's symbols of self-identification are those of home: the china shepherdess and the red-checkered table-cloth. Unlike Laura, Ma prefers the inner to the outer, and her symbolism reflects this.

The differences in the ways Laura and Ma perceive their environment is evident in their approaches to the dugout house at Plum Creek:

> "It is all so tame and peaceful," she [Ma] said. "There will be no wolves or Indians howling tonight. I haven't felt so safe and at rest since I don't know when."
>
> . . . .
>
> Laura lay in bed and listened to the water talking and the willows whispering. She would rather sleep outdoors, even if she heard wolves, than be so safe in this house under the ground. (BPC, p. 17)

While Ma despaired of the often crude living conditions on the prairie, Laura revelled in them. This was, apparently, not uncommon among the children of the frontier:

> An interesting contrast [to the diaries of women who moved to frontier as adults] is provided by the memoirs of women who discovered the West as children or young girls, or who were born there. They generally looked back to that time of their life with great pleasure and tell with much zest of the freedom, the fascinating discoveries, the joys of life close to nature. Having no experience of a different life, they were not constantly making comparisons and regretting past conditions. Whereas many of the testimonies written by women who moved to the western states in their mature life and had to adjust to primitive conditions would constitute excellent material for a study of the various forms human unhappiness can take, the accounts of childhoods spent in the West are refreshing and full of joy. (Fischer, pp. 19-20)

The excitement of exploration and discovery in a land which never was what it seemed to be--an apparently flat prairie which held such secrets as moonpaths leading to silver furred sentinel wolves, and buffalo wallows carpeted with violets--appeals to Laura, but not to Ma. The unexpectedness of moving ("You never know what will happen next, nor

where you'll be tomorrow, when you are travelling in a covered wagon" [LHP, p. 327]) perhaps indicates the greatest difference between Laura and Ma. To Laura it is positive; to Ma it is negative. Laura enjoys the settling, while Ma enjoys the settled. Both Laura and Ma can be seen as representing typical frontier women, for the frontier was settled by both types, by both generations. Their reactions depended strongly upon their early environment: for the frontier woman like Ma, the prairie was competing with her home in the Big Woods, whereas for the frontier child like Laura, the prairie was her home. As Laura explained to Almanzo, "I have always lived in little houses. I like them" (THGY, p. 215).

EXPRESSION OF GROWTH IN THE LITTLE HOUSE BOOKS: LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE

> "It's strange to think," Laura said [to Mary]. "Carrie and Grace are older now than we used to be. They are growing up, too. Yet it would be even stranger if we stayed as we were for always, wouldn't it?" (THGY, p. 247)

"Growth" is a major concern of children's literature, for most critics agree that the protagonist of a children's book must grow in character within the span of the work. There must be a movement from naivete to knowledge through experience. The Little House books afford the reader of children's literature a unique look at the growth of the child, from both the point of view of the child (Laura) and the point of view of the adult (Wilder). The books are properly called autobiography, but, like most autobiography, they are partially fictionalized. Although Wilder did not alter facts consciously,[1] as an adult writing about the experiences of childhood she unconsciously modified her memories to fit her needs.

Growth in children's literature may result from the introduction of factors from outside the main character's world, or it may result from the child's being forced into another world. The latter is the case in the Little House books, in which Laura is taken from the security of the Little House in the Big Woods into the strangeness of the open prairie. As she undergoes cultural redefinition, she suffers shock at first, but from this shock comes growth--and emotional survival. Because the Little House books encompass Laura's life from her early childhood to her fourth year of marriage, her emotional growth must be shown subtly so that the reader feels that Laura is maturing rather than being told that she is. Wilder achieves this sense of change in three ways, each of which will be examined separately.

Laura's survival results from her developing ability to integrate new experiences with prior knowledge. While she is not consciously aware of this evidence of maturation and rarely shows an immediate recognition of this growth, a survey of the Little House series reveals such development. The shift in her perception of experience from a dichotomous ordering of known/unknown and safe/unsafe to an integrated expression is revealed by the change in the way she perceives her environment.

The changing image of the stars also illustrates Laura's growth. They are the same stars which shine in the Big

Woods, but on the prairie they seem different and, until she becomes comfortable with her surroundings, somehow wrong. The stars are a consistent image Wilder uses to illustrate Laura's coming to terms with the prairie and her place in it.

The ways in which Laura discovers the intricacies of language and, later, its deficiencies, further illustrate her maturation. The evolution of her language discovery is complicated by her having to "see out loud" for her blind sister, thus burdening the already precarious relationship Laura has with words. From her initial difficulties in understanding linguistic subtleties in Little House in the Big Woods to her caution in approaching the language of her marriage vows in These Happy Golden Years, her emotional growth is expanded by her acceptance of the inadequacies of language as a communicative tool.

Laura's way of seeing, and thus defining, her environment details her growth. In Little House in the Big Woods, her main concern is security, and that security is her home. Prevalent words used to describe it are "safe," "snug," and "cosy"--enclosure words:

> They were cosy and comfortable in their little house made of logs, with the snow drifted around it and the wind crying because it could not get in by the fire. (LHBW, p. 44)

The elements, snow and wind, belong to the outer world and desire to be part of the inner world: the wind "cries" because it cannot be inside the snug little house. Inside is preferable to outside in the young Laura's eyes, and to her, it is only natural that outer elements would want to be part of the inside. The house is a refuge for Laura, a sanctuary against that which she does not know or understand. The contrast of the inner and outer worlds is a dichotomy expressed throughout Little House in the Big Woods and part of Little House on the Prairie[2] and becomes resolved only through an integration of knowledge and experience.

Laura sees the outer world as threatening and feels vulnerable in it. She depends upon Pa and Jack the dog to protect her from it. They act as intermediaries between the outer world (unknown and unsafe) and the inner world (known and safe):

> At night, when Laura lay awake in the trundle bed, she listened and could not hear anything at all but the sound of the trees whispering together. Sometimes, far away in the night, a wolf howled. Then he came nearer, and howled again.
>
> It was a scary sound. Laura knew that wolves would eat little girls. But she was safe inside the solid log walls. Her father's gun hung over

> the door and good old Jack, the brindle bulldog, lay on guard before it. Her father would say,
>
> "Go to sleep, Laura. Jack won't let the wolves in." So Laura snuggled under the covers of the trundle bed, close beside Mary, and went to sleep. (LHBW, p. 3)

Pa and Jack are the only characters in Little House in the Big Woods who are capable in both the inner and outer worlds; to them Laura entrusts her survival.

Laura's mother is the keeper of the inner security of Laura's home. She is not as comfortable in the outer world as are Pa and Jack, but in her home she is at ease, for she knows the boundaries, the limits. She is in control. Even at the messiest of household jobs, she has dominion: when she prepares hulled corn, "she never splashed one drop of water on her pretty dress" (LHBW, p. 220).

The descriptive passages of Little House in the Big Woods reinforce the theme of the inner world as security. The sights and smells of the full attic which Wilder describes are, on the primary level, indicative of a hunger-free Wisconsin winter. They represent physical survival. On the secondary level, they indicate security against the outside: all that the family needs is inside, where Laura can see and smell it. The sights and smells represent emotional survival and independence. Again, Wilder's word choice emphasizes Laura's distinction between the inner

and the outer worlds:

> Often the wind howled outside with a cold and lonesome sound. But in the attic Laura and Mary played house with the squashes and pumpkins, and everything was snug and cosy. (LHBW, p. 20)

The contrast of the words "cold and lonesome" with "snug and cosy" emphasizes the dual ordering of the world as a child sees it. For the young child, the gradations of experience between polar extremeties has not been introduced: everything is either one way or another, with no shading between the two possibilities.

As Little House in the Big Woods closes, Laura has not yet had to leave her home. Her concept of the world has not been challenged. The first seventy pages of Little House on the Prairie, the next book in the series, describe in detail her being forced to examine a larger part of the world than she has before acknowledged as being part of her own--the prairie. The contrast between the spaciousness of the prairie and the close neighborhoods of the Big Woods is great, and at first she does not like what she sees:

> All around the wagon there was nothing but empty and silent space. Laura didn't like it. (LHP, p. 7)

She does not feel as threatened as she would if she were alone on the prairie, however:

> But Pa was on the wagon seat and Jack was under the wagon; she knew that nothing could hurt her while Pa and Jack were there. (LHP, p. 7)

On the prairie, Pa and Jack retain their roles as protectors.

Laura, like most young children, has an egocentric view of the universe: wherever she is is the middle of the world. Visual evidence seems to support her belief, for she stands exactly between two horizons, no matter where she might go:

> In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle.
>
> All day long Pet and Patty went forward, trotting and walking and trotting again, but they couldn't get out of the middle of that circle. When the sun went down, the circle was still around them and the edge of the sky was pink. . . . The campfire was small and lost in so much space. But large stars hung from the sky, glittering so near that Laura felt she could almost touch them.
>
> Next day the land was the same, the sky was the same, and the circle did not change. (LHP, p. 13)

Laura and her family are literally the center of her world.

Laura's perspective on her environment is forced to undergo a change, for her surroundings offer a new visual perspective: she can see more than she could before. The sky seems bigger, the land seems larger, and suddenly Laura and her family seem smaller:

> In all that space of land and sky stood the lonely, small covered wagon. And close to it sat Pa and Ma and Laura and Mary and Baby Carrie, eating their breakfasts. (LHP, p. 41)

The careful enumeration of the members of the Ingalls family reflects Laura's growing ability to place people and things in their perspectives, and to realize that all the necessary parts for her safety are there--her family (home) is there, so she is secure. The narrowing of the field of vision from land and sky to the covered wagon to each member of the Ingalls family to the detail of eating breakfast is a further reassurance for her that life is continuing as it should, and that she is still safe, even in this unknown world.

However, Laura is still awed by the comprehension of how small she is in comparison to the world. She does not yet know where, if anywhere, the world does end. She is unable even to imagine what happens or what exists beyond her field of vision:

> He [Pa] went away. For a little while they could see the upper part of him above the tall grasses, going away and growing smaller. Then he went out of sight and the prairie was empty. (LHP, p. 42)

Laura does not understand that simply because Pa has disappeared, the prairie is not empty--for she does not know how far the prairie world extends, and cannot judge beyond evidence granted her by her eyes. She sees nothing, so it must be empty.

As Laura begins to know the prairie, her attitude changes, and a reconciliation of the previously known world and this new world creates one world for Laura. However, she still limits her definition of the world to what she has experienced, and the focus is still self-centered:

> All around them, to the edge of the very world, there was nothing but grasses in the winds. . . . Laura was very happy. . . . All these sounds made a great, warm, happy silence. Laura had never seen a place she liked as much as this place. (LHP, pp. 48-49)

Laura's education in the "world" is furthered by her acquaintance with Mr. Edwards, a "wildcat from Tennessee." Mr. Edwards, who "could spit tobacco juice farther than

Laura had ever imagined anyone could spit tobacco juice" (LHP, p. 63), is unlike anyone Laura had ever met in the Big Woods, and he challenges her conception of how the world is peopled, for she has, up to this point, seen the prairie as un-peopled. Her first knowledge of someone who is not a relative, as her neighbors in the Big Woods were, helps her structure her ideas about the unknown. She likes Mr. Edwards, who comes out of the prairie, so the prairie must be capable of producing other interesting people and adventures. When Mr. Edwards leaves, the prairie is no longer an "empty endless land" (LHP, p. 26) but "a shadowy mellowness" (LHP, p. 69). Laura and the prairie have reached a final reconciliation.

As Laura's knowledge of the world has changed, so has her knowledge of herself and her position in the world. The last lines of each of the first two books in the series express the tremendous change in Laura's perception of the world and of herself in the world. It is a change in visual perception forced by the prairie, and, concurrently, in mental perception. From Little House in the Big Woods:

> But Laura lay awake a little while, listening to Pa's fiddle softly playing and to the lonely sound of the wind in the Big Woods. She looked at Pa sitting on the bench by the hearth, the firelight gleaming on his brown hair and beard and glistening on the honey-brown fiddle. She looked at Ma, gently rocking and knitting.

> She thought to herself, "This is now."
>
> She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago. (LHBW, p. 238)

Her world is still self-centered and present-centered, and her favored environment is a closed one.

But in Little House on the Prairie:

> She felt her eyelids closing. She began to drift over endless waves of prairie grasses, and Pa's voice went with her, singing.
>
> "Row away, row o'er the waters so blue,
> Like a feather we sail in our gum-tree canoe.
> Row the boat lightly, love, over the sea;
> Daily and nightly I'll wander with thee."
>
> (LHP, p. 335)

Her imagination has grown enough for her to equate and understand the kinship of the land and the sea: the waves of grasses are very much like the waves of the sea, and both are filled with potential for adventure and exploration. Her universe, with her acceptance of the prairie world, has expanded to include even that which she does not know and she has not seen. The growth from the cosy closed scene of Little House in the Big Woods to the open,

expansive scene of Little House on the Prairie echoes that expansion and that vision.

The development of the image of the stars details Laura's growing ability to assess perspective. Because they are a predominant image only in Little House on the Prairie and These Happy Golden Years, the stars provide a contrast between the child's and the adult's ability to interpret the universe. What the stars symbolize changes: the naive young Laura sees them quite differently from the way the sophisticated adult Laura does.

In Little House in the Big Woods, Laura sees the stars as part of the outer world, and, through her dichotomous arranging of the world into outer/inner and negative/positive, the stars suffer in comparison to an element of the inner world: when Laura goes with Ma to milk Sukey at night, "The stars did not look as warm and bright as the little lights that came from the lantern" (LHBW, p. 104).

Early in Little House on the Prairie, Laura cannot comprehend the perspective that the openness of the prairie affords, and her interpretation of the stars exhibits her difficulty in assessing her new environment; the stars, "glittering so near that Laura felt she could almost touch them" (LHP, p. 13), have never seemed so large. When she is still seeing the world in inside/outside views, she

describes the stars as part of the outer world, and uses the same word, "glittering," to describe them (LHP, pp. 13, 31, 37) that she uses to describe the eyes of the bear in the yard in the Big Woods (LHBW, p. 105), the eyes of the gophers that escape her grasp on the prairie (LHP, p. 43), the eyes of the wolves that howl outside the house (LHP, pp. 96-97), the eyes of the snakes hidden in the tall prairie grasses (LHP, p. 121), the eyes of the Indians (LHP, pp. 139-140) and their beads (LHP, p. 175), and, later, the cloud of grasshoppers that destroys everything in its path (BPC, pp. 192-205), thus reinforcing for the reader the identification of the stars as a part of the outer, and relatively threatening, world. Again, Laura depends upon Pa to act as her intermediary:

> In the wagon everything was safe and snug.
>
> Thickly in front of the open wagon-top hung the large glittering stars. Pa could reach them, Laura thought. She wished he would pick the largest one from the thread on which it hung from the sky, and give it to her. (LHP, p. 37)

Laura is attempting to integrate the stars into her realm of experience by linking them with the inside world: "thread" is something that belongs in the house, and so the large star is not placed in the sky by some mysterious, not understood force--it is, instead, suspended there by

something Laura can identify, an element of safety: it is the same thread which holds her buttons on her dress.

As Laura's perceptions and conceptions of the world are challenged, images begin to mix, the abstract with the concrete, the metaphysical with the physical:

> The large, bright stars hung down from the sky. Lower and lower they came, quivering with music.
>
> Laura gasped, and Ma came quickly. "What is it, Laura?" she asked, and Laura whispered, "The stars were singing."
>
> . . . .
>
> The night was full of music, and Laura was sure that part of it came from the great, bright stars swinging so low above the prairie. (LHP, pp. 50-51)

When the Ingallses live in a settled area, the stars become allied with a symbol of civilization, the church, but the association is still musical. While riding to church on Christmas Eve, Laura hears the new churchbell ringing across the prairie, and its notes "seemed to be the stars singing" (BPC, p. 249).

This mingling of the stars and music in Little House on the Prairie and On the Banks of Plum Creek is repeated in These Happy Golden Years, providing a full contrast of the imagerial perceptions of the child and the adult.

When Laura rides home from singing school with Almanzo Wilder, she looks at the stars again and sees them differently. This time they do not produce music themselves; instead, Laura sings for them, first "In the starlight, in the starlight, / Let us wander gay and free. . ." (THGY, p. 207), and later, "The heavens declare the glory of God. . ." (THGY, p. 213). When Almanzo asks her to sing "the starlight song," she finishes the song she began earlier: "In the starlight, in the starlight, / We will wander gay and free. . ." (THGY, p. 214). Holding her hand, "white in the starlight" (THGY, p. 214), Almanzo asks her to marry him.

Laura interprets the songs of the stars one final time, summing up the essence of the fully developed image of the stars, reflecting her integration of the spiritual and the physical aspects of the world, the culmination of a lifetime of assessing experience:

> The stars are rolling in the sky,
> The earth rolls on below,
> And we can feel the rattling wheel
> Revolving as we go. . . .
> (THGY, P. 238)

Laura's growth to adulthood is marked by a distinct shift in her ability to understand words and their

function. As a little girl in Little House in the Big Woods, she does not truly understand jokes, implied meanings, or double entendres, as illustrated in her missing the point of Pa's parable about the man who cut two cat holes in his door (LHBW, pp. 22-23), or her not understanding why Pa calls her cousin Charley a "liar," "when he had not said a word" (LHBW, p. 211). To her, a word has a meaning, and she does not expect, or even anticipate, that the function of language exceeds that simplification.

In Little House on the Prairie, the book following Little House in the Big Woods, Laura begins to be aware of the complexity of language, particularly its inadequacy as a means of relaying deep emotional response. When she watches the long line of Indians riding westward past the house after the council of war, she longs to be with them. Her eyes catch those of a baby in a basket on its mother's horse, and she begs her father to get it for her, not because of any imperious desire, but because the baby is, to her, a symbol of a part of herself that she can never acknowledge. To Laura, the baby represents a freedom to be part of the landscape, an independence from the bonds of a society which demands sunbonnets and neat braids. Laura tells her father, "It [the baby] wants to stay with me" (LHP, pp. 308-309), although she actually means she wants to go with it. She begins to cry uncontrollably, and Ma asks, "Why on earth do you want an Indian baby, of all things!" (LHP, p. 309).

Laura's response is no answer to Ma's question, but it is the best she can do: "'Its eyes are so black,' Laura sobbed. She could not say what she meant" (LHP, p. 309). She cannot explain why she is acting the way she is because she does not understand why. Words are incapable of expressing this strongly internalized motivation.

In the next book, On the Banks of Plum Creek, Laura realizes that language is not inflexible; it has "loopholes." She discovers that she can tell the truth and lie at the same time. Pa tells Laura and Mary not to slide down the straw-stack, and they promise not to (BPC, p. 55). But, as Laura later points out to Mary, "He did not say we must not climb up it. He said we must not slide down it. I'm only climbing" (BPC, p. 56) and "Pa didn't say we can't roll!" (BPC, p. 58). When Pa finds the straw-stack demolished from their climbing and rolling on it, he asks them, "Did you slide down the straw-stack?" (BPC, pp. 59-60). Both Laura and Mary tell him, quite truthfully, "No."

> She looked straight into Pa's shocked eyes. She did not know why he looked like that.
>
> "Laura!" Pa said.
>
> "We did not slide, Pa," Laura explained. "But we did roll down it." (BPC, p. 60)

By the Shores of Silver Lake follows On the Banks of Plum Creek, and it is in this book that we can see the

greatest change in Laura, for the entire family structure has been disrupted: Mary is blind.[3] This forces additional maturation upon Laura. As Wilder wrote to her daughter, "Mary's blindness added to Laura's age" (Moore 1980, p. 106). Not only has Mary's sight gone, but with it has vanished her ability to communicate non-verbally:

> Her [Mary's] eyes were still beautiful, but they did not know what was before them, and Mary herself could never look through them again to tell Laura what she was thinking without saying a word. (SSL, p. 2)

Until Mary's sight is taken from her, Laura does not realize how much communication is non-verbal. Words are suddenly a vital source of communication and have a tremendous burden placed upon them. They must replace sight. The role of sensory impressions has been widely discussed and debated, from John Locke and Ralph Waldo Emerson to contemporary studies on autism, but no one disputes the fact that words are a poor substitute for any of the senses. Sensory deprivation cannot be equalized with words, but the task of making words compensate for the loss of sight is placed upon Laura:

> On that dreadful morning when Mary could not see even sunshine full in her eyes, Pa had said that Laura must see for her. He had said, "Your two

> eyes are quick enough, and your tongue, if you will use them for Mary." And Laura had promised. So she tried to be eyes for Mary, and it was seldom that Mary need ask her, "See out loud for me, Laura, please." (SSL, pp. 22-23)

The responsibility of being Mary's eyes brings with it frustration, for Mary has always been more literal than Laura. On their way to Silver Lake, Laura "sees out loud" for Mary:

> Beyond the low river the grassy land was low curve behind curve and the road looked like a short hook.
>
> "The road pushes against the grassy land and breaks off short. And that's the end of it," said Laura.
>
> "It can't be," Mary objected. "The road goes all the way to Silver Lake."
>
> "I know it does," Laura answered.
>
> "Well, then I don't think you ought to say things like that," Mary told her gently. "We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean."
>
> "I was saying what I meant," Laura protested. But she could not explain. There were so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them. (SSL, p. 58)

Pa has the closest affinity to Laura in his way of seeing. He says of the area around Silver Lake, "This is different country [from Plum Creek]. I can't tell you how, exactly, but this prairie is different. It feels different" (SSL, p. 60). Ma points out that of course the land is not the same--their location has changed, and the vegetation has changed.

> But that was not what Pa and Laura meant. There was really almost no difference in the flowers and grasses. But there was something else here that was not anywhere else. It was an enormous stillness that made you feel still. (SSL, p. 60)

Part of the reason that Ma and Pa do not communicate well on this level is that Pa is using one sense, intuition, and Ma is using another, sight. They are not the same.

Mary's inability to cope with figurative language re-appears a few pages later. Laura is describing to her two men riding into the sunset:

> "Oh, Mary! The snow-white horse and the tall, brown man, with such a black head and a bright red shirt! The brown prairie all around--and they rode right into the sun as it was going down. They'll go on in the sun around the world."

> Mary thought a moment. Then she said, "Laura, you know he couldn't ride into the sun. He's just riding along on the ground like anybody."
>
> But Laura did not feel that she had told a lie. What she had said was true too. Somehow that moment when the beautiful, free pony and the wild man rode into the sun would last forever. (SSL, p. 65)

This passage is important in three ways: it shows Mary's difficulty in comprehending imagery; it reiterates the spiritual tug the West has on Laura (a restatement of the theme originally expressed in Little House on the Prairie when Laura begs Pa to get her the Indian baby); and it demonstrates how Wilder's literally color-full writing style developed first as an oral form.

The next incident of Laura's battle with the inefficiencies of language again involves Mary. In The Long Winter, Laura and Mary step outside between blizzards:

> . . . [T]he snow-covered prairie, glittering as far as eye could see, seemed menacing. She [Laura] shivered.
>
> "Let's go in, Laura," Mary said. "The sunshine is too cold. Do you see the cloud?"
>
> "There is no cloud," Laura assured her. "But I don't like the weather. The air feels savage, somehow."

> "The air is only air," Mary replied. "You mean it is cold."
>
> "I don't either mean it's cold. I mean it's savage!" Laura snapped. (LW, pp. 286-287)

Laura first experiences the ability of words to overwhelm and control the emotional responses of others in Little Town on the Prairie. Reverend Brown, preaching a fire-and-brimstone sermon at a revival, asks the sinners in the congregation to come forward and repent:

> "Repent ye, repent ye while yet there is time, time to be saved from damnation!" he roared.
>
> Chills ran up Laura's spine and over her scalp. She seemed to feel something rising from all those people, something dark and frightening that grew and grew under that thrashing voice. The words no longer made sense, they were not sentences, they were only dreadful words. (LTP, p. 277)

Until this point, Laura has been the one who controls words; now she realizes that words can exercise a control of their own over people. But robbed of the cognitive base of language itself, words, she sees, are nothing but sounds. A commonality of assumptions between speaker and audience must exist before communication can occur. It is precisely this commonality--or lack of it--which has

prohibited her from being able to speak metaphorically with Mary: Mary, always the practical one, sees what is, not what could be, whereas Laura's eyes are constantly turned to the metaphorical West, to the future.

The next stage in the development of Laura's language skills occurs in These Happy Golden Years. It is at this stage in her life, in her mid-teens, that she begins to realize that even metaphor can have a literal truth. The catalyst for this discovery is Mr. Brewster, at whose house she is boarding while she teaches:

> [H]e sat . . . like a bump on a log. She had heard that said, but she had not realized what it meant. A bump on a log does not fight anyone, but it cannot be budged. (THGY, p. 47)

This new knowledge of denotation's basis in connotation--especially in metaphor--is another step in Laura's understanding the way she uses language.

The continuing lure of the West that exerts its pull on Laura re-appears in a conversation she has with Ida Brown, the minister's daughter. While they stand on a hill looking westward at the Wessington Hills in the distance, Laura comments: "They are so beautiful they make me want to go to them." Ida responds that they are just ordinary hills.

> In a way, that was true; and in another way, it wasn't. Laura could not say what she meant, but to her the Wessington Hills were more than grassy hills. Their shadowy outlines drew her with the lure of far places. They were the essence of a dream. (THGY, p. 153)

As with the Indian baby in Little House on the Prairie and the riders in the sunset in By the Shores of Silver Lake, Laura finds words incapable of expressing her thoughts. The growing Laura has learned that some things simply cannot be put into words, and she does not try to explain to Ida what she means, as she does in Little House on the Prairie when she becomes frustrated with her difficulty in explaining why she wants the baby. She has, at this point, accepted the insufficiency of words.

Laura does, however, know that words are not useless tools: they do have the power to bind one's future to certain acts, when used in promises. Just as she listened carefully to the words of the promise she made to her father in On the Banks of Plum Creek, so she approaches her marriage vows cautiously, telling Almanzo that she will not use the word "obey" in the service: ". . . I can not make a promise that I will not keep, and, Almanzo, even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment" (THGY, p. 269-270). Almanzo recognizes the importance the

word has for Laura, for on the way to the wedding, the only sentence he speaks is to confirm that Reverend Brown will not use the word "obey" in the ceremony.

In The First Four Years, words are responsible for Laura's finding cut that she is pregnant:

> Watching the wheat kernels slide into the open mouth of the sack made Laura dizzy. If she took her eyes from them, they were drawn irresistibly to the newspapers pasted on the shanty walls and she read the words over and over. She was unreasonably annoyed because some of them were bottom side up but she must read them anyway. She couldn't take her eyes from them. Words! Words! The world was full of words and sliding wheat kernels. (FFY, pp. 45-46)

And so it has been through all of Laura's life: the combination of words and wheat kernels, of the survival of the creative spirit and the physical existence. And, in the far horizon of the future years yet unknown at the time of The First Four Years, words and crops would provide both a spiritual and physical fulfillment. For, as Wilder says in the closing of The First Four Years:

> The incurable optimism of the farmer who throws his seed on the ground every spring, betting it and his time against the elements, seemed inextricably to blend with the creed of her pioneer

> forefathers that "it is better farther on"--only instead of farther on in space, it was farther on in time, over the horizon of the years ahead instead of the far horizon of the west. (FFY, pp. 133-134)

Somewhere on the horizon of the years ahead was a point at which the Laura who could not understand the complexity of words would become the writer, Laura Ingalls Wilder, who would discover that the horizon of the years behind offered a promise for people, both young and old, that there was a horizon of hope--all one had to do was turn around and look ahead. Through the use of words as an adult writer, she was able to look at the horizon behind her and see more than wheat kernels--she saw what she had been unable to express throughout her childhood: that within each of us is a longing to be part of what is larger than the individual, larger than the family, larger than the town, larger even than the country. It is the land. As she had first noticed in By the Shores of Silver Lake, the land has something special unto itself:

> There was hardly a wind, but the air moved and whispered to itself in the grasses. Laura almost knew what it said. Lonely and wild and eternal were land and water and sky and the air blowing. (SSL, p. 285)

Laura has come to realize that she is not separated from nature, that as a human being she is, instead, a part of it:

> Laura's heart swelled. She felt herself a part of the wide land, of the far deep sky and of the brilliant moonlight. She wanted to fly. (SSL, p. 165)

Through her growth and perception of the prairie world, she has come to know herself and her position in relation to the world. Her world is no longer marked by words such as "safe," "snug," or "cosy," because she realizes that the world is not any of those, nor would she want it to be so, and that those adjectives gain meaning only through knowledge of their opposites, that "safe" has value only if one has known "un-safe," "snug" if one has known "un-snug," "cosy" if one has known "un-cosy." Much of the growth to adulthood is dependent upon the realization of a wider world than initially perceived: then one may know who and what one is, and accept it: "'The buffalo are gone,' Laura thought. 'And now we're homesteaders'" (SSL, p. 285).

NOTES

[1] This has been substantiated by Wilder (Moore 1980, p. 108) and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane (Mortensen, pp. 428-429).

[2] For a full discussion of Wilder's dichotomous ordering and Bachelardian relationships, see Dolores Rosenblum's essay, "'Intimate Immensity': Mythic Space in the Works of Laura Ingalls Wilder," in Where the West Begins, edited by Arthur R. Huseboe and William Geyer (Sioux Falls, SD: Center for Western Studies Press, 1978), pp. 72-79.

[3] Although the Little House books give scarlet fever as the cause of Mary's blindness (SSL, p. 2), Wilder's biographer quotes Wilder as writing that a stroke resulting from a severe case of the measles was the cause (Zochert, pp. 129-130). It could be that Wilder used "measles" and "scarlet fever" to mean the same thing, but Mary contracted scarlet fever in 1873 and did not lose her sight until 1879.

[4] The "advantages" of verbally seeing for a blind person are detailed by an author whose style was developed in the same way as Wilder's in the article, "Mind's Eye," by L. Dean Murphy (Writer's Digest, Nov. 1981, pp. 64,63).

THE TECHNIQUE OF THE LITTLE HOUSE BOOKS

Introduction

Wilder's prose in the Little House books has been highly praised by critics of children's literature. Frances Flanagan noted, "Mrs. Wilder's success was not accidental; she was in full command of the skills of writing" (Flanagan, p. 207). Sheila Bignell commented on Wilder's "consummate literary skill" (Bignell, p. 8) and Doris K. Eddins wondered how Wilder managed to "keep the tenor of her story so even and the flow of phrases so fluent" (Eddins, p. 44).

What is responsible for Wilder's successful prose? Is it the point of view she adopts in the Little House series, that of a main character who, by the fact that she <u>is</u> the author, lends an air of credence to the plot? Is it the theme, the plot, the tone--the absolute "Americanism"--of the books? Is it the way Wilder's narrative comes alive with imagery and personification, the material which children supposedly reject in favor of the faster moving conversation or action? Or is it the characterization, the "identifiableness" of Laura with children one hundred years later?

It is all of these, and more. Yet identifying aspects of Wilder's prose is not sufficient for revealing her technique. The questioning must advance from "What?" to "How?" How do Wilder's choices of point of view, theme, plot, tone, imagery, personification, and characterization work better in the Little House books than the other choices she might have made?

For the purposes of this analysis, the components of Wilder's technique will be grouped into four sections: point of view; theme, plot, and tone; imagery and personification; and characterization. Each will be evaluated separately to determine its contribution to the enduring success of the Little House books.

Point of View

Wilder maintains an unusual point of view throughout the Little House series. She is the main character and clearly identifies herself as such by specifically naming her main character "Laura Ingalls" and using her full name as author, "Laura Ingalls Wilder." Thus, even before the entrance of Almanzo Wilder at the end of By the Shores of Silver Lake, the reader senses an additional touch of realism in the writing; he or she knows that the story's "Laura" is the author and that the book is more than an absolute fiction. The point of view lends an air of authenticity to the story.

In her first attempt at writing the story of her life, Wilder called herself "Grandma" in the first four paragraphs and then switched to "Laura" in the fifth (Moore 1978, pp. 12-13). This approach was abandoned in favor of the consistent "Laura." Wilder had no grandchildren, and perhaps her assuming an absolutely fictional stance as a grandmother interfered with her ability to write honestly to a particular audience.

Because the experiences of childhood in the late nineteenth century may be alien to the twentieth century child, point of view becomes very important as a means of adding credibility to the material. Wilder must show her audience that while Laura's experiences are unique to her time, Laura herself is not. Laura must be the "universal child" (Lukens, pp. 102-103). She must have the feelings and reactions of a child in any time, in any environment. By choosing to write from the limited omniscient point of view rather than the first person (biographical) point of view,[1] Wilder is free to explore beyond Laura's acknowledged perceptions. The reader knows that Laura sees the flowers on the prairie, for instance, without the flowers being a conscious intrusion in the narrative, as they would have been had Wilder written the books in the first person.

This point of view enables Laura to grow up in the series without seeming precocious. Had Wilder chosen the first person point of view, Laura would have been forced

into commenting on her own maturity as she saw it; instead, the reader sees her growing up--her maturation is reflected in her attitudes, in the attitudes of those who surround her, and in Laura's speech.

Wilder does violate her own strict sense of point of view in The Long Winter, in which she relates several events which occur outside Laura's field of vision. Perhaps this is the result of Wilder's sensing that the retention of a restricted point of view in such a book, in which Laura rarely gets even to step outside the house in town because the weather is severe, would not allow a break in the overwhelming "sameness" of the plot, although Laura herself is never allowed such a break. Limiting the material to Laura's perceptions would have meant limiting the scope of the book to the confines of the house, and often to one room. It is important to note, however, that such shifts in the point of view are complete in themselves. Wilder never allows herself to step into complete authorial omniscience. She attempts to identify these introductions of "new" voices by placing such passages at the beginnings or ends of chapters or by isolating them in separate chapters. Wilder is obviously not comfortable with total omniscience, or an expanded limited omniscience. In the chapter in which Pa and some of the men from the town go hunting for antelope, Wilder switches back and forth between calling Pa "Pa" and "Mr. Ingalls." In the

same chapter, the point of view shifts more frequently than in any other chapter. It begins with Laura's, changes to a shared one (Pa and Almanzo), returns to Laura's, and then changes to Pa's. Such rapid shifts make the chapter seem awkward, perhaps because Wilder was trying to introduce Almanzo as an important character at the same time she was trying to relate a crucial incident.

At one point in the series, Wilder loses the consistent third person voice and slips into first person. Laura's baby sister, Grace, has disappeared from the house on the claim and the family is searching frantically for her:

> If she were little and playing all by herself, Laura thought, she wouldn't go into the dark Big Slough, she wouldn't go into the mud and the tall grass. Oh, Grace, why didn't I watch you? she thought. Sweet pretty little helpless sister--
> "Grace! Grace!" she screamed. Her breath caught and hurt in her side.
>
> She ran on and on. Grace must have gone this way. Maybe she chased a butterfly. She didn't go into Big Slough! She didn't climb the hill, she wasn't there. Oh, baby sister, I couldn't see you anywhere east or south on this hateful prairie. "Grace!" (SSL, pp. 279-280)

The first sentence utilizes third person indirect thought: the "she" in "If she were little. . ." is Laura. The next sentence switches to direct quotation of thought: in this case, "I" is Laura. However, in the sentence beginning, "Oh, baby sister, I couldn't see you anywhere. . ." the "I" is Wilder, not Laura. The verb tense is incorrect for the "I" to be Laura. The simple past is used here in an entirely different sense than it is in the other direct quotation of thought. The past tenses seem to imply the same point in time when in fact they do not. To maintain a consistent point of view, the sentence should read, "Oh, baby sister, I can't see you anywhere. . ." What has occurred is an inadvertant shift, perhaps the result of writing in third person about oneself, or perhaps the result of Wilder's emotional involvement with the narrative moment. Wilder has progressed from "she" as young Laura to "I" as young Laura to "I" as adult Laura (Wilder). The authorial voice has intruded.

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

Theme, Plot, and Tone

For Wilder, theme, plot, and tone intertwine into an inseparable whole. Rose Wilder Lane, Wilder's daughter and a recognized journalist and novelist, advised Wilder to determine the theme of each book before proceeding further with the writing. While they were struggling with the opening of By the Shores of Silver Lake, Lane wrote her mother:

> It seems to me that this book is about railroad- and town-building. Is it?
>
> These themes are mixed up with homesteading, and the lonely winter in the surveyor's house. PLUM CREEK didn't fall into a coherent pattern until after a lot of fumbling and wasted time and work you wrote me that its theme was the wheat crop. Let's get the theme of this one clear right away. (Moore 1980, p. 103)

The theme, Lane pointed out, determined where in time the book should start. Wilder wanted By the Shores of Silver Lake to begin at the depot, but Lane felt that beginning the action at the house at Plum Creek, with Aunt Docia's arrival, was more in keeping with the theme of railroad and town. Wilder clarified that the theme was not building, but homesteading (Moore 1980, p. 104), and questioned what effect starting the book at the Plum Creek house

would have on the reader. In a letter to Lane, Wilder noted, "It would begin with a recital of discouragements and calamities such as Mary's sickness & blindness. I don't like it!" (Moore 1980, p. 104), and a few days later added that she was concerned with the tone such a beginning would set: "The readers must know all that [about Mary's blindness and the family's setbacks] but they should not be made to think about it" (Moore 1980, p. 104). She felt that Lane's way was too depressing and asked, "But how to write that chapter and not have it too sad" (Moore 1980, p. 105).

Wilder gave in on the opening of By the Shores of Silver Lake. The first chapter is structured as Lane desired, and the theme is firmly established as Pa's excitement about the prospect of homesteading and Ma's reluctance to leave her settled home dominate the chapter. Their emotions stand out like sparks against the flat narrative of the financial straits and desperate situation the Ingallses are in at Plum Creek. The second chapter introduces the audience to an adolescent Laura, now almost thirteen years old. It is a necessary chapter, for she was still a little girl, only eight years old, at the end of On the Banks of Plum Creek. The third chapter quickly moves the location of the story to the train depot, and the story of homesteading begins. Thus, both Wilder and her daughter are satisfied. The first two chapters are merely introductory chapters, and the story does not

actually begin until the third.

The theme of The Long Winter, the battle between the weather and the settlers, requires a different plot structure than do the other themes in the series (Anderson and Groff, p. 101). It demands a clear resolution, one in which either the elements or the people win. The conflict mounts as the relentless onslaught of blizzards erodes the settlers' physical and emotional resources. The appearance of the gentle chinook, a sharp contrast to the harsh blizzard winds, seems to announce the denouement:

> Pa was whistling as he came from doing the chores.
>
> "Well, girls," he said gaily. "We beat old Winter at last! Here it is spring, and none of us lost or starved or frozen. . . ." (LW, pp. 312-313)

However, it is a false resolution. The town still faces starvation, for all that is left to eat is a rapidly dwindling store of wheat. Another month passes before the conflict is finally resolved with the arrival of a freight train carrying supplies.

Rebecca Lukens has described the plot structure of Little House in the Big Woods as a straight line, for the narrative action does not build to one climactic point (Lukens, p. 40). While this is true of Little

House in the Big Woods, the plot structure becomes more involved if one views the series as "a seven-volume historical novel" (Moore 1980, p. 105). If the volumes (eight, counting The First Four Years) are seen as a whole, certain repetitions occur. For instance, in the series Pa builds a floor three times. The compacting of the event as an informational passage each time it appears shows Wilder's recognition of narrative structure. In Little House on the Prairie, Wilder describes Pa's making a puncheon floor in great detail. The splitting of logs in preparation for the building itself constitutes four paragraphs. The actual making of the floor is also described in detail:

> One day the last log was split, and next morning Pa began to lay the floor. He dragged the logs into the house and laid them one by one, flat side up. With his spade he scraped the ground underneath, and fitted the round side of the log firmly down into it. With his ax he trimmed away the edge of the bark and cut the wood straight, so that each log fitted against the next, with hardly a crack between them.

> Then he took the head of the ax in his hand, and with little, careful blows he smoothed the wood. He squinted along the log to see that the surface was straight and true. He took off last little bits, here and there. Finally he ran his hand over the smoothness, and nodded.
>
> "Not a splinter!" he said. "That'll be all right for little bare feet to run over."
>
> He left that log fitted into its place, and dragged in another.
>
> When he came to the fireplace, he used shorter logs. He left a space of bare earth for a hearth, so that when sparks or coals popped out of the fire they would not burn the floor.
>
> One day the floor was done. It was smooth and firm and hard, a good floor of solid oak that would last, Pa said, forever. (LHP, pp. 128-129)

The next time Pa builds a floor, the description is quite compacted:

> Then Pa laid the floor of silky-smooth boards that were grooved along the edges and fitted together perfectly. Overhead he laid another floor for the upstairs, and that made the ceiling of the downstairs. (BPC, p. 11)

And, the last time Pa builds a floor, it occurs outside the narrative action of the story entirely:

> There were no windows and no door for the doorway, but there was a floor. (SSL, p. 264)

True storytellers do not repeat themselves. To have gone through the entire process of floor-building with the same intensity it was described in Little House in the Big Woods would have been insulting to the reader, who Wilder always assumes has been listening and reading the series in chronological order.

The scene in Little House on the Prairie in which Laura's eyes catch and hold those of an Indian baby as the Osages leave Lesser Reserve is one of the most emotion-laden incidents in the series. It shows her early identification with the natural born of the prairie:

> Laura looked and looked at the Indian children, and they looked at her. She had a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl. . . .
>
> Laura looked straight into the bright eyes of the little baby nearer her. Only its small head showed above the basket's rim. Its hair was as black as a crow and its eyes were black as a night when no stars shine.
>
> Those eyes looked deep into Laura's eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that

> little baby's eyes, and she wanted that one little baby. . . .
>
> The baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes.
>
> "Oh, I want it! I want it!" Laura begged. The baby was going farther and farther away, but it did not stop looking back at Laura. "It wants to stay with me," Laura begged. "Please, Pa, please!" . . .
>
> It was shameful to cry, but she couldn't help it. The little Indian baby was gone. She knew she would never see it any more. (LHP, pp. 307-309)

In The First Four Years, five Indians come to the Wilder house and Laura sees them go into the barn where her pony, Trixie, is. Because she is angry, she forgets her fears and runs out to the barn. She slaps one of the Indians when he touches her arm.

> It made him angry and he started toward her, but the other Indians laughed, and one who seemed to be the leader stopped him. Then with signs pointing to himself, his pony, and then with a sweep of his arm toward the west, he said, "You go--me--be my squaw?"

> Laura shook her head, and stamping her foot again, motioned them all to their ponies and away, telling them to go.
>
> And they went, riding their running ponies without saddles or bridles.
>
> But as they went their leader turned and looked back at Laura where she stood, with the wind blowing her skirts around her and her braids flying, watching them go away across the prairie into the west. (FFY, pp. 33-35)

In The First Four Years, the participants of the Little House on the Prairie scene have grown up, and their reactions are different--they are acting as adults, not children. Laura finally has the chance to fulfill her childhood desire, to go with the Indian baby on "ponies [that] did not have to wear bridles or saddles" (LHP, p. 307) and to ride into the west, but she refuses. It is her final rejection of her childhood. Their eyes still lock, however, across the prairie, as their souls have locked across the prairie for years.

Although the scene from The First Four Years is an evident reference to that of Little House on the Prairie, Wilder does not mention Laura's previous encounter directly. To do so would show Laura consciously romanticizing her own past, which the no-nonsense adult Laura would never do.

The repetition of elements throughout the series contributes to the overall tone--one of optimism in the face of adversity--and to the theme of the steadfastness of the family. Such recurrences also accentuate the continuity of the story, so that it can be viewed as one complete novel rather than eight discrete books.

> In all that satisfaction, perhaps the best part was knowing that tomorrow would be like today, the same and yet a little different from all the other days, as this one had been. (LTP, p. 34)

Imagery and Personification

The use of imagery, or an appeal to the senses, heightens the immediacy of the narrative moment by adding dimension to setting, action, and character (Lukens, p. 118). Wilder uses the senses in the Little House books to recreate Laura's experiences as completely as possible, to act as interpretative commentary on those experiences, and to lend a sense of "being there" on the prairie. She is thus able to recreate the prairie as it was but is no longer, and to share with her readers the total experience of watching the prairie as it changes daily and, further, as it changes from the encroachment of people upon its native wildness. For Wilder, anything worth describing was worth describing in its totality, and that totality demands sensual inclusion.

The most commonly used sense is vision. Details of everyday occurrences are noted, thus helping to recreate Laura's environment as she perceives it and to share with the twentieth century reader experiences which are not a part of his or her life.

Laura watches carefully, and her observations are filled with the detail of daily life on the American frontier. The detail is so specific that the reader feels as if he or she knows how to build a door or smoke-cure pork after reading a passage showing one of the Ingallses in such a pursuit. But the writing is not sheerly informational. The inclusion of Laura's sensual reactions takes such writing out of the realm of the purely informational and moves it into the mainstream of the story.

Wilder uses vision, and color in particular, to focus the narrative "eye" on events. Usually her color "portraits" concentrate on the prairie and reflect Laura's satisfaction with her surroundings. Detailed and colorful descriptions mirror her feelings and indicate her pleasure. When she is happy, the prairie is a riot of colors. The colors Wilder uses to describe the prairie are basic colors--she does not shade them:

> Low bushes grew on the sides of the hollow--buck-brush with sprays of berries faintly pink, and sumac holding up green cones but showing here and there a bright red leaf. The golden-

> rod's plumes were turning gray, and the ox-eyed daisies' yellow petals hung down from the crown centers. (LHP, pp. 174-175)

> The tree-tops along the creek were colored now. Oaks were reds and yellows and browns and greens. Cottonwoods and sycamores and walnuts were sunshiny yellow. The sky was not so brightly blue, and the wind was rough. (LHP, p. 201)

Wilder frequently describes "the glory of colors" (LTP, p. 4) of the sunrises:

> The sky was very faintly pink, then it was pinker. The colour went higher up the sky. It grew brighter and deeper. It blazed like fire, and suddenly the little cloud was glittering gold. In the centre of the blazing colour, on the flat edge of the earth, a tiny sliver of sun appeared. It was a short streak of fire. Suddenly the whole sun bounded up, round and huge, far bigger than the ordinary sun and throbbing with so much light that its roundness almost burst. (BPC, p. 46)[2]

> Shafts of golden light shot higher and higher in the eastern sky, until their brightness touched the water and was reflected there.
>
> Then the sun, a golden ball, rolled over the eastern edge of the world. (SSL, p. 72)

Such attention to the wonders of the sunrise reflects Wilder's personal appreciation of it. According to Wilder's biographer, she shared one particular sunrise with her daughter:

> "Outside the barn the morning was gray," Rose wrote, "and as I came up the path I was surprised to see my mother, wrapped in a shawl, standing outside the kitchen door. 'Hurry!' she called to me. 'It's changing every second!'
>
> "The barn behind me was black against a rosiness of the east, but it was not the sky she wished for me to see. It was the evanescent colors, the lights and the shadows subtly changing down the length of the valley at the coming of dawn. We stood and watched them silently till the rosy sky faded to the color of water, and sunshine came yellow across the fields." (Zochert, p. 204)

Wilder also creates tonal pictures of sunsets on the prairie. The diction of the sunset descriptions is different from that of the sunrise descriptions, however. The sunrises are described with an exuberance which is replaced by majesty in the sunsets:

> The sun was sinking to rest, like a king, Laura thought, drawing the gorgeous curtains of his great bed around him. But Mary was not pleased by such fancies. So Laura said, "The sun is sinking, Mary, into white downy clouds that spread to the edge of the world. All the tops of them are crimson, and streaming down from the top of the sky are great gorgeous curtains of rose and gold with pearly edges. They are a great canopy over the whole prairie. The little streaks of sky between them are clear, pure green." (LTP, pp. 111-112)

> The sun sank. A ball of pulsing, liquid light, it sank in clouds of crimson and silver. Cold purple shadows rose in the east, crept slowly across the prairie, then rose in heights on heights of darkness from which the stars swung low and bright. (SSL, p. 67)

The language of the sunset descriptions is drawn out by the long vowel sounds: the assonance of the long "e" in "pleased," "streaming," "streaks," and "green" in the passage from Little Town on the Prairie forces the movement of the language to slow. The language of the sunrise descriptions, however, depends upon the explosive consonant sounds: the repetition of the "b" sound in the passage from On the Banks of Plum Creek--"brighter," "blazed," "bounded," "bigger," "throbbing," and "burst"--gives the sunrise description a kinetic energy which is lacking in the sunset descriptions.

Wilder introduces sound into her writing in many ways. Often she uses onomatopoeia. Her words are not especially innovative transcriptions of sounds; rather, they are common interpretations. However, the context of such sounds adds a dimension to them. In the description of the Indian ponies, the sounds of the ponies' feet alliterate with the "p"s of the preceding sentences:

> Laura was excited about the ponies. There were black ponies, bay ponies, gray and brown and spotted ponies. Their little feet went trippety-trip-trip, trippety-trip, pat-patter, pat-patter, trippety-pat-patter, all along the Indian trail. (LHP, p. 306)

At other times, Wilder translates the onomatopoeic

sounds. The geese flying south carry on a one word conversation. Although Wilder does not literally interpret the conversation, the context tells us what they must be talking about:

> The wind was cooler now, and all along the creek bottoms flocks of wild ducks were rising, flying, settling again. Up from the creek came long lines of wild geese, forming in V's for their flight farther south. The leader in front called to those behind him. "Honk?" he called. All down the lines the wild geese answered, one after another. "Honk." "Honk." "Honk." Then he cried, "Honk!" And, "Honk-honk! Honk-honk!" the others answered him. Straight away south he flew on his strong wings, and the long lines evenly followed him. (LHP, pp. 200-201)

While the geese speak in a one-word language, other birds have multi-word languages:

> All along Plum Creek the birds were talking. Sometimes a bird sang, but mostly they talked. Tweet, tweet, oh twitter twee twit! one said. Then another said, Chee, Chee, Chee, and another laughed, Ha ha ha, tiraloo! (BPC, p. 18)

Wilder carefully locates sound on the prairie. Her recording of the sounds Laura hears exhibits a purposeful

circle of movement:

> On the other side of the canvas, Pet and Patty were eating their corn. When Patty whooshed into the feed-box, the whoosh was right at Laura's ear. There were little scurrying sounds in the grass. In the trees by the creek an owl called, "Who-oo? who-oo?" Farther away another owl answered, "Oo-oo, oo-oo." Far away on the prairie wolves howled, and under the wagon Jack growled low in his chest. In the wagon everything was safe and snug. (LHP, p. 37)

The catalogue of sounds begins near Laura and is directed outward on the prairie, each sound successively farther away, until it returns to its starting point, near Laura.

Wilder also uses simile to relay sensual messages, particularly those which are unfamiliar to the readers. While Laura and Mary are playing hop-scotch one afternoon, they hear a "queer sound":

> Laura was not exactly scared, but that sound made her feel funny. It was the sound of quite a lot of Indians, chopping with their voices. It was something like the sound of an ax chopping, and something like a dog barking, and it was something like a song, but not like any song that Laura had

> ever heard. It was a wild, fierce sound, but it didn't seem angry. (LHP, p. 265)

Wilder begins with an implied metaphor, "chopping with their voices," which she then expands upon by stating the simile upon which the implied metaphor is based--"the sound of an ax chopping." Two more direct comparisons are given, "a dog barking" and "a song." The indirect personification of the sound, "angry," follows the description by comparison: by focusing first on the recognizable descriptions (everyday sounds in a twentieth century child's life), Wilder enables children to have a basis for creating in their own minds the image of a "wild, fierce sound" that does not "seem angry."

Sensation which is unfamiliar to Laura is also relayed through simile. When Laura moves into the frame house at Plum Creek after months of living in the dugout, she cannot recognize the sound she hears one night. It seems to be "thousands of little animals scampering on the roof" (BPC, p. 124). It is the rain, which she could not hear in the dugout, and which she has almost forgotten the sound of.

When Laura hears the blizzard winds howling around the house in town at De Smet, she identifies other sounds in them:

> Laura lay in bed and listened to the winds blowing, louder and louder. They sounded like

> the pack of wolves howling around the little house on the prairie long ago, when she was small and Pa had carried her in his arms. And there was the deeper howl of the great buffalo wolf that she and Carrie had met on the bank of Silver Lake.
>
> She started trembling, when she heard the scream of the panther in the creek bed, in Indian country. But she knew it was only the wind. Now she heard the Indian war whoops when the Indians were dancing their war dances all through the horrible nights by the Verdigris river.
>
> The war whoops died away and she heard crowds of people muttering, then shrieking and fleeing screaming away from fierce yells chasing them. But she knew she heard only the voices of the blizzard winds. She pulled the bedcovers over her head and covered her ears tightly to shut out the sounds, but still she heard them. (LW, p. 187)

Although all of these sounds have negative connotations--wolves howling, Indians chanting war cries, and people screaming--they are all sounds of animals and people she has identified with. They seem here to be representing that potential for evil she has already identified in them.

Laura is also sensitive to touch. She enjoys the feeling of mud squeezing up between her toes (BPC, p. 19)

and pulling on her ankles (SSL, p. 78). When she strokes the furs Pa has trapped, she distinguishes the texture of each animal, preferring the "silky mink" to the "thick fur of red foxes," "the soft brown fur of beaver," or "the shaggy wolf's fur" (LHP, p. 233). Minnows nibbling on her feet make "a funny, squiggling feeling" (LHP, p. 112) or "a tickly feeling" (BPC, p. 20).

Wilder also uses cross-overs from other senses to describe touch, taste, and smell. In a visual description, touch is often implied: "The grasses were crisping yellow now. . ." (BPC, p. 62). Hoarhound candy has "a rich, brown, tangy taste" (BPC, p. 78), and her description of oyster soup relies strongly on the visual to imply taste:

> First, there was oyster soup. In all her life Laura had never tasted anything so good as that savory, fragrant, sea-tasting hot milk, with golden dots of melted cream and black specks of pepper on its top, and the little dark canned oysters at its bottom. She sipped slowly, slowly from her spoon, to keep that taste going over her tongue as long as she could. (SSL, p. 204)

Transferred epithets are also used to describe smells. Roasted pork has a "rich, oily, brown smell" (LTP, p. 229), and Laura's description of the smells of the prairie relies upon the connection of baking (smell) with a heated oven (touch):

> The air was really as hot as the air in an oven, and it smelled faintly like baking bread. Pa said the smell came from all the grass seeds parching in the heat. (LHP, p. 174)

Wilder's sensitivity to her surroundings is revealed through the way she personifies Laura's environment. When Laura leaves the Big Woods, the little house is credited with the ability to see: "The shutters were over the windows, so the little house could not see them go" (LHP, p. 6). Wilder's little houses are capable of feeling: when Laura leaves the house in Indian Territory, "The little log house and the little stable sat lonely in the stillness" (LHP, p. 325). Laura's environment acts as a mirror of her own feelings. When she leaves the little houses, she feels a sense of loss and separation, and she sees these feelings reflected in them. And when she has not resolved her feelings about a new environment, the environment reserves its judgment about her:

> The largeness of the empty house seemed to wait and listen. It seemed to know that Laura was there, but it had not made up its mind about her. It would wait and see. (SSL, p. 143)

Nature is intensely personified in the Little House books, so intensely that it in fact becomes a character.[3]

It is alive in the same sense that Laura is alive, and it can feel and act as she does. Thus, the wind can "cry because it could not get in by the fire" (LHBW, p. 44), the grasses on the prairie can "sing and whisper and laugh" (LHP, p. 112), and the earth can "breathe softly" (SSL, p. 67).

Wilder's descriptions of the prairie reflect Laura's attitudes. When Laura is secure, the prairie is a pleasant place to be. When she is afraid, it is menacing. The prairie seems to have an ability to change itself according to its intent. When Laura is happy, the prairie is filled with music and dancing (LHP, p. 68), but when she worries, the prairie seems upset:

> Home seemed farther and farther away. The prairie seemed larger, and a wind ran over it, whispering something frightening. All the grasses shook as if they were scared. (LHP, p. 178)

When the entire Ingalls household seems to be in danger, the menace of the prairie intensifies:

> Laura had to play outdoors by herself, and she had a queer feeling about the prairie. It didn't feel safe. It seemed to be hiding something. Sometimes Laura had a feeling that something was watching her, something was creeping up behind

her. She turned around quickly, and nothing was there. (LHP, p. 288)

Through the inclusion of the senses and the personification of Laura's environment, Wilder brings an immediacy to her writing, a necessity in writing about a time and a place which have passed.

Characterization

The characterization of the Ingalls family is carefully drawn. Wilder carefully edited her manuscripts to maintain character consistency, deleting material which drew credibility away from the characterization and strengthening sections which complimented established traits (Moore 1975, pp. 112-116).

Although Laura is the main character in the series, Pa is the center of the family. His decisions, which he discusses with Ma in advance, but which she rarely challenges, determine the future of the family. Although he has a "wandering foot [that] gets to itching" (THGY, p. 138) and is rarely comfortable settled, he never makes a strictly selfish move, for his family is his major concern.[4]

Pa has the ability to understand the prairie. When he plays his violin one night during the long winter, the melody is a "strange" one:

> The fiddle moaned a deep, rushing undertone and wild notes flickered high above it, rising until they thinned away into nothingness, only to come wailing back, the same notes but not quite the same, as if they had been changed while out of hearing.
>
> Queer shivers tingled up Laura's backbone and prickled over her scalp, and still the wild, changing melody came from the fiddle till she couldn't bear it and cried, "What is it, Pa? Oh, what is the tune?"
>
> "Listen." Pa stopped playing and held his bow still, above the strings. "The tune is outdoors. I was only following it." (LW, p. 120)

Pa is in charge of the family's morale. His great store of songs keeps the family's spirits high when they are in the midst of a collective depression or when he senses that they are in danger of losing their optimism. Certain songs have special significance for Pa: "The Big Sunflower" is his "trouble song" that he sings in blizzards (SSL, p. 250; LW, pp. 37, 124). Pa's music has been interpreted symbolically:

> Pa's singing and fiddle playing show his role as a mediator between heaven and earth. Singing

> is symbolic of the natural connection between all things, the spreading and the exaltation of the inner relationship that holds things together. It is no accident that Pa reverts to music at moments of stress or when life seems to be coming apart. (Anderson and Groff, p. 103)

Ma's attitude throughout the books is one of placidity. When she does lose her temper or speak sharply, the family reacts with shock, as they do when she objects strongly to Pa's going with the other men in town to convince a homesteading farmer to sell them his seed wheat for food:

> Pa looked at her, startled. They all stared at her. They had never seen Ma look like that. She was quiet but she was terrible. (LW, p. 244)

One of Ma's primary functions is to act as a foil to Pa's impetuousness. She alone can soothe him when he becomes agitated, as she does when he shouts back at a blizzard:

> "Howl! blast you! howl!" he shouted. "We're all here safe! You can't get at us! You've tried all winter but we'll beat you yet! We'll be right here when spring comes!"
>
> "Charles, Charles," Ma said soothingly. "It is only a blizzard. We're used to them."

> Pa dropped back in his chair. After a minute he said, "That was foolish, Caroline. Seemed for a minute like that wind was something alive, trying to get at us."
>
> "It does seem so, sometimes," Ma went on soothing him. (LW, pp. 288-289)

Both Ma's and Pa's speech is spattered with truisms. Ma's maxims express her philosophy of dealing with pioneer life: "There's no great loss without some small gain" (BPC, p. 199; LTP, p. 102), "Never complain of what you have" (LW, p. 243), and "We must cut our coat to fit the cloth" (LTP, p. 107). At one point she expounds upon this philosophy:

> "This earthly life is a battle," Ma said. "If it isn't one thing to conter with, it's another. It always has been so, and it always will be. The sooner you make up your mind to that, the better off you are, and the more thankful for the pleasures." (LTP, pp. 89-90)

Ma seems to be predominantly concerned with raising the children. Her conversation never focuses strictly on herself, and she guards others' conversation to insure that her children do not hear unsuitable language or stories which might frighten them. She also monitors her children's

language and never hesitates to interrupt them to correct their grammar:

> It was only a moment before Carrie exclaimed, "That's him now--"
>
> "This is he," Ma said almost sharply.
>
> "That's he coming-- It don't sound right, Ma--"
>
> "Doesn't sound right," said Ma.
>
> "Right straight across from Fuller's Hardware!" cried Carrie. (LTP, p. 303)

Ma also guards her children from vanity and believes that it can be avoided if one is not praised too highly. When Laura wears a new dress, Ma is cautious not to over-extend her approval, and tells her, "Pretty is as pretty does" (THGY, p. 163). Only on special occasions does Ma bend her rules. When Mary tries on one of her new college dresses, Ma tells her:

> "You are not only as stylish as can be, you are beautiful. No matter where you go, you will be a pleasure to every eye that sees you." (LTP, p. 96)

On Laura's wedding day, Ma compliments Laura, but does so with reserve, for Ma does not wholly approve of the black wedding dress ("You know they say, 'Married in black, you'll wish yourself back'" [THGY, p. 271]), and

her somewhat superstitious nature tempers her compliment: "Even if your dress is black, you look perfect" (THGY, p. 279).

No matter where the family might be, on the prairie in a covered wagon or in a dugout on the Kansas plains, Ma watches the family's etiquette. As she tells Laura, "You must mind your manners, even if we are a hundred miles from anywhere" (LHP, p. 40), advice which serves Laura in good stead when she is invited to a party in De Smet and worries about how she should act:

> "Oh, Ma, what will I do? I never went to a party. How must I behave at a party?"
>
> "You have been taught how to behave wherever you are, Laura," Ma replied. "You need only behave properly, as you know how to do."
>
> No doubt this was true, but it was no comfort to Laura. (LTP, p. 239)

Pa's wildness compliments Ma's passivity, and in like measure Laura's wildness compliments Mary's passivity. The disagreements between the two sisters constitute a major portion of the Little House series. Laura has difficulty overcoming her jealousy of Mary's golden curls, an envy which is in great part fostered by Ma's comments and actions. When Aunt Lotty comes to visit them in Wisconsin, a fight breaks out between Laura and Mary, for

Ma has told them to ask Aunt Lotty "which she likes best, brown curls or golden curls" (LHBW, p. 181). Aunt Lotty, who is put in an untenable position, answers gracefully, "I like both kinds best" (LHBW, p. 182). Later Mary brags to Laura that golden hair is prettier, and

> Laura's throat swelled tight, and she could not speak. She knew golden hair was prettier than brown. She couldn't speak, so she reached out quickly and slapped Mary's face. (LHBW, p. 183)

The trouble between Laura and Mary goes deeper than just hair color, however, for theirs is a basic opposition of character. Mary is always obedient and never naughty, while Laura is the impulsive one whose acts often get her in trouble. Sometimes Laura's actions are brave and helpful, as they are when she drives the cattle back home:

> Mary was so scared that she could not move. Laura was so scared that she jumped right off the rock. She knew she had to drive Spot and Pete and Bright into the stable. (BPC, p. 47)

When they are faced with a decision to make, Mary tends not to act at all and be quite literal about the instructions she has received from their parents, but Laura tends to act without considering her parents' later reactions: she lives for the moment.

Mary is happiest inside the house and becomes snappish when she is forced to act outside her home:

> "I declare, you eat more plums than you pick up," Mary said.
>
> "I don't either any such thing," Laura contradicted. "I pick up every plum I eat."
>
> "You know very well what I mean," Mary said crossly. "You just play around while I work."
>
> But Laura filled her big pail as quickly as Mary filled hers. Mary was cross because she would rather sew or read than pick plums. But Laura hated to sit still; she liked picking plums. (BPC, p. 64)

After Mary loses her sight, the dichotomy of character traits strengthens. Mary has already been depicted as being smugly correct: ". . . Mary was a very good little girl who always did as she was told" (LHBW, pp. 181-182). After she goes blind, she becomes even more virtuous, to the point of being self-righteous at times. Mary gains a certain gratification from being able to tell when Laura is misbehaving, and to tell Ma what she has "seen." When they are on the train to Silver Lake, Mary reports to Ma that Carrie is fidgeting and then exclaims that Laura is, too, and smiles "in satisfaction" (SSL, p. 17). However, before she leaves for college, Mary "confesses" to Laura:

> Mary had always been good. Sometimes she had been so good that Laura could hardly bear it.

But now she seemed different. Once Laura asked her about it.

"You used to try all the time to be good," Laura said. "And you always were good. It made me so mad sometimes, I wanted to slap you. But now you are good without even trying."

Mary stopped still. "Oh, Laura, how awful! Do you ever want to slap me now?"

"No, never," Laura answered honestly.

"You honestly don't? You aren't just being gentle to me because I'm blind?"

"No! Really and honestly, no, Mary. I hardly think about your being blind. I--I'm just glad you're my sister. I wish I could be like you. But I guess I never can be," Laura sighed. "I don't know how you can be so good."

"I'm not really," Mary told her. "I do try, but if you could see how rebellious and mean I feel sometimes, if you could see what I really am, inside, you wouldn't want to be like me."

"I <u>can</u> see what you're like inside," Laura contradicted. "It shows all the time. You're always perfectly patient and never the least bit mean."

"I know why you wanted to slap me," Mary said. "It was because I was showing off. I wasn't

> really wanting to be good. I was showing off to myself, what a good little girl I was, and being vain and proud, and I deserved to be slapped for it."
>
> Laura was shocked. Then suddenly she felt that she had known that, all the time. But, nevertheless, it was not true of Mary. She said, "Oh no, you're not like that, not really. You are good." (LTP, pp. 11-12)

Mary's blindness, while it makes Laura realize how much she and Mary have shared, further separates them, for they no longer attend social activities together. Mary cannot attend school in De Smet. Thus Carrie and Laura begin to be close, and it is Carrie that Laura takes with her on her adventures.

The characters of Pa, Ma, Mary, and Laura are carefully drawn to illustrate the alliances which develop within families. Laura and Pa share traits: both are outspoken, restless, and would rather be outdoors than indoors. Mary and Ma share traits: they speak with caution, would rather be settled than moving, and are happiest indoors. Laura and Pa take chances and relish risk, while Mary and Ma are careful and prefer not to gamble. The differences in the family members are revealed in their reasons for being glad about moving to the claim after living in town:

> This was the gladdest moving day that Laura had known. Ma and Mary were glad because this was the end of traveling; they were going to settle on the homestead and never move again. Carrie was glad because she was eager to see the homestead, Laura was glad because they were leaving town, Pa was glad because he always liked moving, and Grace sang and shouted in gladness because all the others were glad. (SSL, pp. 259-260)

The traits that each member of the Ingalls family exhibits are emphasized deliberately, for it is these traits which sustain each member through times which threaten their individuality or, more drastically, their survival. Pa's exuberance and Ma's reserve support them during the hardships of homesteading; their opposite natures temper the extremities of the other's. Mary's conformity to rules serves her well when she loses her sight, for it makes her easily trainable. She does not mind being restricted to beadwork and is, in fact, quite proud of her accomplishments in this area, for she has always liked working with her hands, making quilts or sheets, for example. Laura's love for the prairie sustains her when, as Laura Wilder, she watches her husband's dreams shrivel with the wheat; it is this love which makes "her spirit ris[e] for the struggle" (FFY, p. 133). By emphasizing these traits, Wilder clari-

fies the reactions of each character to particular situations.

Conclusions

Wilder was quite aware of the subtleties of technique and of the importance of not relaxing her standards on any aspect of it. Rosa Ann Moore's textual studies show numerous instances of Wilder's struggling with a line or a phrase, trying to get it to speak precisely for her. Wilder addressed the issue in a speech early in her career:

> You will hardly believe the difference the use of one word rather than another will make until you begin to hunt for a word with just the right shade of meaning, just the right color for the picture you are painting with words. Had you thought that words have color? The only stupid things about words is the spelling of them. (Zochert, p. 212)

The writer has many choices in his or her work. Decisions must be made about vital aspects of technique, decisions which will determine the effectiveness of the work. The choices are numerous, and the measure of talent, one could suppose, lies in knowing which choice to make. Laura herself expresses the writer's dilemma when she discusses words and meaning with Mary:

"We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean," [said Mary].

"I was saying what I meant," Laura protested. But she could not explain. There were so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them. (SSL, p. 58)

NOTES

[1] Wilder did try a first person narrator in Pioneer Girl, a book which was to follow Little House in the Big Woods and encompassed the rest of Laura's childhood (Moore 1978, p. 13).

[2] The British spellings here are the result of the "damn ignoramuses in publishing offices" (Moore 1980, p. 103).

[3] For another, more explicit, example of the prairie as a character in a novel, see Ole Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth.

[4] One could consider Pa's eating pancakes and bacon at the Wilder brothers' house while his family is living on bread, potatoes, and tea (LW, pp. 211 and 250) a selfish act, but the alternatives--rejecting the offer of the food or asking if the other five members of the Ingalls household could join in the dinner--would be improbable or incongruous in such a situation.

EPILOGUE: "OVER THE HORIZON"

The story of Virginia Kirkus, then editor of the children's books department of Harper and Row, missing her train stop because she was engrossed in reading the manuscript of Little House in the Big Woods, "the book no depression could stop" (Kirkus, p. 429), has become a legend in children's literature. Legends such as this have sustained struggling writers, but the true story behind the book's creation reveals a closer alliance between Laura Ingalls Wilder and those struggling would-be authors than is initially apparent.

Driven by a need for money, Wilder began to consider various money-making schemes soon after the turn of the century. Consultation with her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, already an established journalist and novelist, led Wilder to writing. She began to write magazine and newspaper articles, most of which were connected with her position as a farmer's wife. Many long steps were yet to occur between articles about egg production and books chronicling an American childhood on the frontier.

In 1919 Wilder apparently began to think about branching out from farming subjects, and sent Lane some children's stories. Lane's response is one which will live in children's literature legends, right beside that of Wilder's "discovery":

> I have not had time to go over the children's stories. I glanced through them, and think them good. But they are not so important as the articles, for there is no opportunity to make a name with children's stories. (Moore 1978, p. 12)

Thirteen years after her daughter's dismissal of "children's stories" as a way "to make a name," Little House in the Big Woods was published and received immediate critical acclaim. Wilder's "name" was made.

Although Laura Ingalls Wilder is recognized as a major children's writer, not just in the United States but also abroad (her books have been translated into more than thirty languages and have not only stayed in print but have been read steadily since their introduction to the American public fifty years ago), her work is generally overlooked in critical studies. Wilder's control of language in both narration and description merits a larger study than it has been accorded.

Wilder's books are not only well-written, but have achieved a popularity that has surpassed the written medium and expanded into television. Although the television series, Little House on the Prairie, takes great liberties with the books, it serves as an example of the continuing relevance of the material to today's society.

The Little House books have been proven to be historically accurate. Genealogical research has established the existence of almost all of the characters, and historical identification of inventions, social events, and political happenings further substantiates their accuracy. The books offer documentation for the study of female maturation on the American frontier a century ago, a documentation which has a slightly different focus than do diaries, journals, and autobiographies.

Much work remains to be done with Wilder's writings. Greater insights into her work would undoubtedly be possible if her manuscripts and papers were examined. Unfortunately, access is difficult. The manuscripts are scattered across the United States: California, Michigan, Missouri, and Virginia. This scattering of primary source material and the paucity of secondary source materials create a definite impediment to a much-needed critical study.

The Little House books tell us much about ourselves, where we've been as a nation, and where we've been as individuals. Perhaps it is the absolute confidence of the theme, that it is indeed "better farther on," which is responsible for the series' unflagging popularity the past fifty years despite rapidly fluctuating trends in children's literature. Wilder's faith in the future--whether that future be one year or one hundred years hence--offers assurance to children that the best is yet to come: it is waiting "over the horizon of the years ahead."

"I am planning to write a book some day," she [Mary] confided. Then she laughed. "But I planned to teach school, and you are doing that for me, so maybe you will write the book."

"I, write a book?" Laura hooted. She said blithely, "I'm going to be an old maid schoolteacher, like Miss Wilder. Write your own book! What are you going to write about?"

But Mary was diverted from the subject of books. (THGY, p. 136)

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